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A Week of Passion;

OR,

The Dilemma of Mr. George Barton the Younger.

By EDWARD JENKINS.

17 TO 27 VANDEWATER ST
NEW YORK
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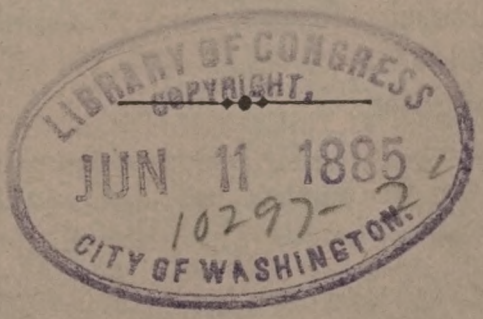
A NOVEL.

By EDWARD JENKINS.



NEW YORK:
GEORGE MUNRO, PUBLISHER,
17 TO 27 VANDEWATER STREET.

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DEDICATION

IN FRANK ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF MANY COURTESIES

AND AS A TESTIMONY OF

UNVARYING REGARD FOR NOBLE QUALITIES EARNESTLY EMPLOYED

THIS STUDY OF HUMAN EMOTIONS

CHIEFLY IN THE SPHERE WHICH HE ADORNS AND DIGNIFIES

IS DEDICATED

TO THE EARL OF CARNARVON.

A WEEK OF PASSION.

CHAPTER I.

A SENSATION.

ACROSS Regent Circus one June afternoon, at the top of the season, the sun, drooping down over Notting Hill, shot his bright rays along the broad plane of Oxford Street, on a scene of motley and vivacious tumult. The tide of traffic, which had been swelling all the day along the great channels of metropolitan movement, was now at its height. Running with a strong flush from east and west, and north, and south, its currents met and commingled their varied waters in this narrow lock, or strait, where the prismatic foam and spray from the aristocratic fountains of Mayfair, Belgravia, or Tyburnia flashed lightly against the dull, foul, turbid torrents that poured from a thousand fetid sources of misery and crime; and strong, impetuous currents of trade rushed brusquely by the calmer and more indolent eddies of wealth and pleasure. Up and down Oxford Street, up and down Regent Street, poured the incessant traffic, brisk, noisy, turbulent, with grating sound of wheels, and patter clatter of horses' hoofs and cries of drivers, the deep, sea-like murmur of innumerable voices, and the tramp and shuffle of countless feet. The lumbering omnibuses, perpetually coming and going, discharged or embarked with feverish haste hundreds of eager passengers, while conductors and drivers exchanged injurious compliments with the harried, badgered policemen, who, exhibiting an Argus-like vigilance and mercurial activity, strove to give some sort of direction to the jangling currents of humanity that swirled around them. Now and then some odd impediment would be rolled into the melée, an overladen truck, a broken-down cab, a fallen horse, an omnibus with an obstinate driver or unmanageable team, which would choke up the passage, change the currents into a whirlpool, and set the surging tides a-roaring all about it in hideous tumult. Here and there, through the more vulgar ruck of wagons, carts, cabs, hansoms, and omnibuses, fine horses in magnificent equipages where rank and beauty aired their gay plumage on silken cushions, picked their way in stately pride. On the pavement, the crowds of foot-passengers circled and jostled; hurrying, idling, sauntering; ogling, staring; busy, vacant, alert; sly, mean, elegant, shabby, flashy; timid, brazen, guileless, vicious, or criminal —a strange congeries of misery and gayety, of sober diligence and empty tolly, of light, hopeful youth, and hopeless, disillusioned,

perverted maturity—all orderly in the midst of disorder, and externally polite, if often hiding in their bosoms flames of Vesuvian passion and inhuman or unsocial sentiment.

Here, then, this Thursday afternoon, on the 26th of June, 188–, at twenty-seven minutes past 4 o'clock P.M. by the watch of Sergeant Tugg, of the Y Division, who took a note of the time—instantaneously, without any preliminary movement or outcry, a loud explosion, proceeding from the very center of the Circus, shook every heart and fiber of life in that motley crowd with fear and trembling. For a moment there was a hush, solemn and awful, then a universal outcry, as the shuddering crowd rushed from the center, and palpitating foot-passengers dived into the nearest shops for shelter, while shouts of "Fenians!" "Dynamite!" "Nitro-Glycerine!" were jerked into the air from hundreds of pale and quivering lips. The commotion in the roadway was appalling. Horses started, snorted, plunged, broke away; vehicles collided and jammed their wheels; shouts, shrieks, oaths, and calls for help filled the air. One horse—a magnificent thorough-bred—which had been close to the spot where the terrifying phenomenon occurred, reared high, pawed the air for a second or two, showing a chest and neck covered with blood and foam, and then falling on the near side, overturned the vehicle to which he was attached—an elegant cab, driven by a young exquisite, fashionably attired, a cigarette between his lips, a flower in his button-hole. This young gentleman, having come up Regent Street and drawn rein only an instant before to allow an omnibus coming from the City to pass, was remarkable for his cool manner, the perfection of his equipage, the *chic* of his little tiger, the beauty and mettle of his horse.

When the first movement of consternation had subided, it was seen that a space had been cleared in the middle of the Circus, not by the dire effects of the explosion, but by that strange, instinctive terror which decentralizes a mob in the midst of which some catastrophe has happened. In this free space nothing was to be seen except the elegant cab, lying on its side, the maddened horse struggling to recover his footing, the young and fashionable Jehu extended motionless, with the cigarette still firmly clinched between his teeth, his hat lying some yards away; while the little tiger, who had fallen on his feet, was bravely attempting to get a hand on the bridle of the frantic animal. Only one other sign of the explosion, which had sent such a sudden thrill through the crowd, was visible. It was a hole in the macadam, looking more like the depression which would have been caused by the perpendicular fall of a cannon-ball of no great size, than the cavity one would have expected to have been made by a force capable of producing the noise and concussion experienced by the crowd. It was evident that the effect of the detonation had been intensely localized—many people had been shocked, and none apparently hurt, excepting always the prostrate dandy. Three or four policemen speedily ran from the various points where they had been stationed, to assist the only visible victim of the accident. But, even as they moved, their course was checked—they looked round with an expression of mingled wonder and fear, for a cry of indescribable horror went up from the crowd. It proceeded from the tops of the omnibuses, from coachmen and

liveried footmen, from ladies in the carriages, and people who had been picking their way across the Circus on foot.

"Blood!"

Blood sprinkled in a fine rain, and here and there in large drops, on faces, on hands, on bright dresses, and light bonnets, and silken sunshades, and delicate-tinted gloves; on shiny hats, and ivory shirt-fronts, and white waistcoats, and with it here and there small knobs and particles of something which made people instinctively shudder and cry out, when they became conscious of its presence on skin or clothing!

What had happened?

Amid a scene of wild terror and confusion, the babble of a thousand tongues, the gathering pressure of eager mobs that came running up Regent Street, down from Portland Place, and along Oxford Street, East and West, breathless, clamorous, asking: "What is it? What is it all about? Who is hurt?" the police vainly strove to keep back the crowd, and to acquire some idea of what had actually occurred. It was no easy task.

No one could be found who had seen anything—no one who had felt anything beyond a shock; no bodies lay about, except that of the young gentleman, who appeared to be alive, though senseless from a cut on the head, but he was evidently untouched by any explosive. There were no palpable signs except that rain of flesh and blood, which had sent a ghastly thrill of horror through the crowd, and a dent in the roadway about the size of a French wash-basin.

Modern science had achieved a fresh marvel. A horrible crime had been committed in the presence of a thousand people, and there appeared to be no traces left, either of the victim or the perpetrators.

Sergeant Tugg, of the Y Division, alone seemed to have retained his presence of mind. He rapidly gave orders to the two or three policemen at hand, and induced a few bystanders of steadier nerves than the rest to assist in keeping back the crowd. One policeman picked up the prostrate gentleman, and he was conveyed to a mourning shop at the corner, where the young ladies, trembling with fear, and palpitating with the unusual excitement of having to tend a handsome beau under such circumstances, fluttered about him with kind but useless attentions. The sergeant himself seized the horse's bridle and managed to pull him up on his feet, the broken shafts dangling at his flanks. The animal stood trembling; his face and silky chestnut breast seemed to have been dashed over with a mixture of crimson and black. The policeman looked at his hands, which had touched the breast of the horse, and saw with a shudder that it was blood which had drenched the noble creature. Looking round keenly he could find no trace on the ground of anything which would account for the explosion. The little tiger, standing on his toes, held the horse's head on the off-side, and tried to soothe him with his voice. The boy's eyes looked as if they would burst from his head, his cheeks were deadly pale, his teeth chattered.

"What was it, young man?" said the sergeant. "Was your master a-carrying hexplosives through the streets, hey?"

His eye had the severity of Justice in her first inquisitive mood.

"My lord," cried the boy, "carrying explosions in his cab! Stuff and nonsense, bobby. Why, didn't you see what happened?"

"No, sir, or else I wouldn't a-hasked you"—with dignity.

The boy stretched his hand.

"Just as we was arrived there, right by the lamp, and my lord—"

"What lord?"

"Why, the Earl of Tilbury. I should have thought you'd a-know'd him. My lord had pulled up Pam—that's the horse's name—to let an omnibus pass, and I were a looking round from behind to see what were up, and there—right there, where that little hole is—there were a gentleman, a short gentleman, five feet six or so, passing right in front of our horse, when all of a sudden like—whiff! there was a noise, and he went into ten thousand million pieces. I see it in a flash, and I don't know no more. That there on the horse's neck and on your hands is what come from him, sergeant. Maybe it's one o' them dinamighty-ists."

Sergeant Tugg examined the boy for a moment sternly, as became a member of the Force, listening to such a tale from the lips of horsey youth, to see whether he was trying to "gammon" him; but the tiger's aspect and manner were altogether too serious to admit of such a suspicion. He was dreadfully frightened, and in earnest, and the policeman, while he tried to clean his hands with a dirty handkerchief, was so stunned by the unheard-of explanation the boy had griven, that he was only awakened out of his reverie by the pressure of the crowd upon him, which had become dangerous. He drove his elbows out vigorously.

"Back, I say! Bigby, Wiggets, Jones, keep 'em all back!"

"What is it? What is it?" cried the crowd.

The sergeant could not resist so great an opportunity of showing off his official perspicacity.

"It's a Fenian houtrage! A man has blown hisself up!"

"What does he say?" shouted those who were out of hearing.

A stentorian voice, near the guardian of public safety, bellowed in a tone of raillery,

"He says it's a Fenian has blown himself up with dynamite!"

A London crowd is as changeable as yeast. It ferments or goes flat, or is sweet or sour in a moment. The concourse, which an instant before had been shuddering with an indefinable horror, now suddenly burst into a rattling peal of derision and laughter.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

"Ho! ho! ho!"

"Say, bobby, where is he? Where's he gone to?"

"Pick him up, bobby. Save the pieces!"

"Run him in!" etc., etc.

Nothing witty, but chaff—none the less aggravating to a dignified officer of the peace.

The laughter was prolonged all round the vast concourse, which had become massed in the Circus, and through the skirts of the crowd, now extending far down the adjacent streets, as the report of the sergeant's theory went from mouth to mouth. The idea of a Fenian blowing himself up in this sensational manner seemed to be diverting.

Sergeant Tugg looked round at the man with the big voice—a stout, florid, yellow-haired Yorkshireman, with great broad shoul-

ders, dressed in a light homespun suit, and showing on his ample bosom about half an acre of linen.

"Your name, sir?" he said.

"My name! What for?" said the other, laughing. "You're not going to arrest me for telling them what you said?"

"No; I want you as a witness."

"Me!" cried the Yorkshireman, looking round appealingly to the crowd. "I know nothing about it."

"Don't you? Then I want your coat and waistcoat and shirt." He pointed to the articles.

The Yorkshireman looked down, and for the first time became aware that he, too, was splashed with spots of crimson and black. He turned pale.

"By ——! What's that?"

"Blood!" said the sergeant, with a solemnity which at any other time would have struck the observer as comic, as he pointed with a huge forefinger. "Bits of a man's flesh among it, I think. There! see, on your shirt, a few hairs—some bits of wool."

"Oh, dash it—I say, let's get out of this!" said the man, lifting his powerful arms, and struggling to back out through the crowd.

"Not so fast," said the sergeant, quietly, putting his fingers on the man's shoulder. "Your name and address. I must have those things."

"So you shall, but for Heaven's sake let me go and take them off! Samuel Hilton, Beverley, Yorkshire. I am at the Craven Hotel."

"Good. You will let me have your clothes to-night? I will call for them. Stay, do you mean to say that you saw nothing?"

"I saw nothing at all—on my honor. I was there—coming this way—but I was looking round at—at a lady. Suddenly I heard a noise that nearly deafened me, and a strong wind like went past me. Then I had to jump out of the way of this trap, or it would have fallen on me. That's all I know."

The Yorkshireman went off, and the policeman turned to look for others. Thereupon every one who had on him any of those small, ghastly marks of the disaster began to button himself up and get away as fast as possible; for Londoners are not fond of going into the witness-box at the Old Bailey. It is too rude and open a confessional even for the most pious of men.

Nevertheless, by great energy and activity, the police, now that they had seized the idea, worked at it, and succeeded in getting the names of about thirty people who had been near the spot, and had either felt the shock of the explosion or bore some traces of it about their persons. Not one of the crowd was hurt. No one, except the tiger, appeared to have seen the victim or the agent of the explosion. The police were convinced that the boy's account was correct. An unknown man, dressed as a gentleman, crossing Oxford Circus in broad daylight, had suddenly exploded in the middle of a concourse of moving humanity, and gone into a hundred thousand pieces, leaving no traces except minute spots of blood and bits of flesh and clothing, which had fallen in a shower over a large space. There was no clew to this individual's name, position, address, or to the

motives which had brought him there, charged with the fearful forces by which he had been instantaneously reduced to atoms.

Before midnight the news of the catastrophe had spread through all that part of the metropolis which, during the season, constitutes "London;" at the clubs, in the House of Commons, at the dinner-tables of society, nothing else was talked of: it was bruited about among the shop-keepers and other dependents of the wealthy quarters; in the servants' halls of Belgravia, Mayfair, Brompton, and Kensington. The evening papers had hastily headed their reports, "Supposed Fenian Outrage," though who were the outragers and who the outraged by this strange event, beyond the unfortunate person who had spontaneously exploded, the editors did not even hazard a guess. It was not, however, till next morning that, by means of the indefatigable reporters and the unwearied printers of our colossal service of journalism, the whole of the four millions of London were able to form a clear idea of what had happened, and to learn how much and how little was known about the incident, its victim, and its causes. The account of "The Thunderer," which was the least sensational, will inform the reader of all that had been discovered and suspected within the few hours which intervened between six in the afternoon of Thursday, the 26th, and three in the morning of Friday, the 27th instant.

(From "The Thunderer.")

"Yesterday afternoon, at about half past four o'clock, there occurred in Regent Circus one of the most mysterious and horrible events which it has ever been our lot to chronicle in these columns. In full daylight, in the midst of a crowd of pedestrians of all classes, and a current of vehicles of every description, a loud and startling explosion took place, quite close to the refuge established for the protection of foot-passengers in the center of the Circus. The utmost terror was excited in the varied and busy multitude which is always, at that hour, to be found, especially during the season, concentrated at that junction of traffic.

"When the explosion took place a sudden panic seized the crowd, who dashed toward the pavements and into the shops, while the disorder and commotion produced in the vehicular traffic beggars description. Besides the main actor, agent, or victim, as we may please to call the individual thus incontinently blown out of existence, and into atoms so minute that it may be said nothing remains of him, there was only one other person seriously hurt, and that unhappily a young and distinguished member of the House of Lords. We regret to have to report that the Earl of Tilbury, who, at the moment, was driving across the Circus in his cab, and was close to the scene of the explosion, was, owing to the sudden frenzy of his horse, thrown out on his head, and we learn, from inquiries made at the last moment, is still lying insensible in the family mansion in Grosvenor Place. Sir Alfred Marks and Sir Claude Crampton were summoned to a consultation by the family physician, Doctor Wilbraham, and have remained with his lordship up to the hour of our going to press. We are deeply pained to learn that they have formed a very unfavorable opinion of the case, and Lord Tilbury's mother, the Countess of Tilbury, has been summoned from Linton

to her son's bedside. No sooner had the crowd begun to recover from the terror caused by this extraordinary incident than it was observed that no other damage had been done than the formation of a slight depression in the roadway at the spot where the victim of this horrible death was standing, and the incidental injury to the Earl of Tilbury, which is in itself a sufficiently grave matter. The young earl only came of age a few months since, but his distinguished abilities, his rare promise, his vast wealth, and his position in society, will create anxiety on his behalf among an immense circle of eminent friends. It was some time before the police on the spot could form any consistent theory of the cause of the accident. At first it was supposed that Lord Tilbury might have been carrying some dynamite cartridges in his cab; but this was promptly denied by his tiger, an intelligent young man named Lightbones, who is stated to have behaved with remarkable coolness, and who has given the police the most important information they possess as to the circumstances of the accident. It appears that the Earl of Tilbury, having pulled up suddenly, the young man, Lightbones, peered rapidly round the hood of the cabriolet to ascertain the cause of the delay. At that instant he saw—only for a brief glance—a short, square-built, gentlemanly looking man, clad in some dark vestments, the color of which he had not time to determine, who seemed to be hesitating for a moment whether to cross in front of the horse alongside an omnibus traveling from east to west. Lord Tilbury, who had come from Piccadilly, was going up Regent Street. Lightbones had scarcely set eyes on this individual, when, to use the expression of the lad himself, 'he exploded all to pieces,' with a loud report, scattering blood and minute fragments of his body all around for a considerable distance. Hats, coats, parasols, etc., received a shower of this dreadful human *débris*, creating a very vivid impression of horror on the startled crowd. The neck and breast of the horse Lord Tilbury was driving received some portion of the shower, and yet the animal was not even singed by the explosion, which seems to have gone directly upward, and not downward or sideways. Singularly enough, however, though the legs and feet and boots of the author or sufferer of the accident have entirely disappeared, along with the rest of his body, the trace left by the explosion is comparatively slight, the pavement being indented to the depth only of ten inches, to a diameter of about a foot or sixteen inches. At the moment of the explosion the man was standing between the head of Lord Tilbury's horse and one of the omnibuses of the L. G. O. Company, which runs to Notting Hill, being about equidistant from both; but the force of the explosion seems to have been rather in the direction of Lord Tilbury, for, on examination, the paneling of the omnibus shows few signs of its proximity to the dreadful catastrophe, although its windows were fractured. Hence it is conjectured that the explosive substance, whatever it was, was placed on that side of the individual which was nearest to his lordship; but this is mere conjecture, and, in the opinion of some theorists, the fact is taken to prove exactly the opposite conclusion, namely, that the greatest force of the explosion was exerted in the direction where it encountered the greatest resistance. This, and other interesting problems

arising out of this curious and mysterious case, will, however, we are informed, be submitted to Professor Green and other experts, and will doubtless be cleared up in the inquiry which has been ordered by the Home Secretary, who, accompanied by the Chief Commissioner and Mr. Sontag, head of the Detective Department, visited and inspected the spot at a late hour last night.

"The coroner for the district, Mr. Walpole Samuelson, was immediately notified of the occurrence, but we understand that he has considerable doubt as to his power to open an inquest, seeing that the destruction of the subject of the catastrophe was so complete that there is not even a remnant for a coroner's jury to sit upon, and consequently no means whatever of identification. The matter has been referred to the law-officers of the Crown, and the coroner will be guided by their decision, which will probably be given in the course of to-day.

"It adds an additional trait to the romantic horror and mystery of this event that, up to the hour of going to press, the police have been totally unable to discover any trace or clew to the identity of the person who has met his fate in this strange manner, or to the perpetrators, if any, of the outrage. No one appears to have noticed the defunct except the lad Lightbones. A Yorkshire gentleman, who has given his name and address to the police, and who had his coat, waistcoat, and shirt spattered with the remains of the deceased, states that though he was near the spot, and felt the shock of the explosion, he had not noticed any one in his vicinity answering to the description given by Lord Tilbury's servant. No one has as yet come forward to reclaim a lost relative, but possibly, during the day, the publicity given through our columns (*sic* *) may lead to some communication being made to the police which will give them a clew. Meantime all is buried in pure conjecture. The first idea of the police authorities was that the Fenians were concerned in the outrage. But the incident is too strange and unique to admit of such an explanation. The Fenians have not yet shown any disposition to risk their own lives in their wild and wicked efforts to alarm society and mystify the authorities. Supposing the individual to have been a Fenian carrying a machine to be used for the nefarious object of frightening the English public, it is quite conceivable that it might have prematurely exploded, but it may be presumed that it would have been charged with a much greater force than was sufficient to blow only one human being to atoms. A far more plausible theory is that some chemist or mining engineer may have been carrying in his pocket a small quantity of nitro-glycerine or a dynamite cartridge, for experiment, and have become the victim of his foolhardy carelessness. However it may be, the affair is one of the most mysterious than has ever tested the detective capacity of our police, and their inquiries and investigations will be followed by the public with feverish interest."

"The Thunderer" also published "Another Account by an Eye-witness," who, as it turned out, had seen nothing of any conse-

* "The Thunderer" never acknowledges the existence of any other means of publicity.

quence, but who was able to say so with a certain graphic apparatus of suggestion which had struck the editor, and several letters from persons who were more or less near the scene of the catastrophe when it occurred; also one letter from an enterprising tradesman in Piccadilly, who, giving his name and address, declared that he had felt the shock of the explosion in his shop, and that his watch had stopped at the precise moment of the catastrophe.

There is nothing London loves so much as a mystery, and this was one of a novel and romantic order. The excitement among all circles increased during the whole of the 27th of June, and arrived at an intense pitch when an evening journal issued a "special," stating that a single trace had been found of the chief actor in this horrible tragedy. A photographer's assistant, in arranging the blinds of his studio at midday, to reduce the brilliancy of the light for a lady of a certain age, who was sitting for her portrait, had discovered, lying on the ledge of a window at the top of the house, which was situated in Oxford Street, about two hundred and fifty yards from the scene of the explosion, a human hand, bearing evidence of having been violently torn from the wrist of its proprietor, and the police now had in their possession a valuable, if imperfect, clew to the identity of the deceased The hand was a right hand, appearing to have been that of a muscular man of past the middle age, who, however, was not accustomed to manual labor. It was sprinkled on the back with fine hairs, had no ring on the finger, but exhibited one important peculiarity. The upper joint of the little finger was bent, as if that joint had once been broken. On submitting the hand, however, to the inspection of eminent surgeons, they gave it as their opinion that this slight deformity, which would have passed almost unnoticed when the owner was living, and kept the hand closed or in movement, was congenital.

The excitement now rose to the n^{th} power. The roofs of all the houses within a mile of the Circus were searched in the hope of discovering other relics of the mysterious unknown. Scotland Yard was inundated with articles gathered on the house-tops, embracing every variety of rejected rubbish, like old tooth-brushes, broken spectacles, remnants of worn-out boots, pieces of whalebone, broken combs, and ragged pieces of clothing, an infinity of things which it could be seen at a glance were the casual *jetsam* of the dwellers in the house-tops of London, and in no way whatever connected with the individual whose ghastly and original exit from London society had created such a sensation.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE HOME OFFICE.

THEN happened something which always happens in London when the identity of those who have perished by crime or disaster is a matter of doubt: a thing which affords the police and every reflecting man so much to think of regarding the hidden history of that great ocean of humanity, the English metropolis. No less than thirteen persons of the male sex were, within the next two days,

signalized to the police by anxious relatives or officious friends as missing, as answering more or less correctly to the meager description given by Lightbones of the man he had seen; and some of them as having a deformity of the little finger of the right hand! It is impossible to form any theory about such a singular mania, but there is no doubt that persons exist, of weak intellects and a perverse, petty conceit, who, in default of any other means of acquiring a temporary notoriety, will try to gain a factitious importance by associating themselves or their friends with some sensational drama. They have lost a relative or a friend; they wish to put themselves in evidence, before the greatest possible number of people, as being connected in some way, however remotely, with that about which all the world is talking. They are perfectly aware from the first that the victim or the sufferer is not the person in whom they are interested, but that is of no consequence. If they can, only for a few days, pose as relatives or connections of any one whom crime or accident has made notorious, if they can only get the whole machinery of justice set a-going for a short time at their instance, they fancy that they have acquired a certain importance in the eyes of their friends. To do this, they will even stretch a point and make false statements about dress and appearance. They are able ever afterward to say something like this—

"You remember the fellow that blew up in Regent Circus? Well, you know, my aunt's husband's eldest son by his first wife, who was a clerk at Batty & Levison's, in the City, disappeared only a week before the occurrence. The moment I read of it in the papers, I said to myself—'That was Joe Jackson.' Joe was only five feet six, and always dressed in dark clothes. Well, sir, I went to Scotland Yard and saw the police. Then I was introduced to Mr. Sontag, of the Detective Department. Then I had a correspondence with the chief commissioner. They laughed at me, sir, and were most impertinent. And then I complained of the conduct of the police to the Home Secretary. Yes, sir, I wrote a letter myself to the Home Secretary. I received a reply from his secretary. See, here it is"—he produces it for the thousandth time from his pocket. "'Sir, I am directed by the Home Secretary to acknowledge receipt of your letter of the 10th instant, relating to the conduct of the police in regard to the disappearance of Mr. Joseph Jackson, and to state that the matter has been referred to the Chief Commissioner of Police for explanations.'"

"Did you ever get the explanations?"

"No. Joe turned up in Buenos Ayres; he had run away with a hundred pounds. But I tell you, sir, if ever I have occasion to go to Scotland Yard again, they'll know who they have to deal with. The Home Secretary must have given them an awful wigging!"

Thus a conceited fool is able to waste the time and tax the energies of a great department, and would rather have been kicked down the stairs of the Home Office than be unable to say that he had been there.

Often the relatives of some man who has disappeared will exhibit the most exasperating anxiety to identify him with some discovered body which he did not remotely resemble, and will insist upon their

dismal fancy in the face of patent impossibilities. Altogether, the policeman, out of comic operas, may sing, with a good deal of doleful emphasis, that in reality his "lot is not a happy one!" When engaged in the pursuit of a criminal he not only has to meet and counteract all the wiles and tricks of confederates, but he is being continually hampered by the children and imbeciles who throw themselves between his legs. Crops of idle suggestions and foolish conjectures, of feeble criticisms and commonplace counsels, springing from conceited and ignorant brains, are harvested and delivered *gratis* in Scotland Yard; and abuse, which is severe in the inverse ratio of the abuser's competence to pronounce an opinion, is often showered down on "Bobby's" devoted head. Defeated, detected as a humbug, and summarily ejected from Scoland Yard, the busybody rushes to the press, and the groaning editor, gnashing his teeth, jams down whole sheaves of foolish scribblings into his overburdened waste-paper basket. He can bear witness, at all events, that a time of sensation has a fatal influence in developing the pestilent activity of all the idiots.

A fair proportion of the cases reported to the police in the present instance were no doubt to be attributed to the egregious and mischievous activity of some such persons as we have designated: but, after making every allowance, a sufficient number of apparently authentic cases were left to make one shudder at the extent of the unknown, unsuspected, and undiscovered crimes of London life.

The Home Secretary and the Chief Commissioner of Police, both of whom took a keen interest in this case, because of its novelty and horror, were distracted with vexation and despair at the complications introduced by all these cases into the problem they were endeavoring to solve. They were for the hundredth time appalled at the vastness of the mystery of London crime, and the inadequacy of their small organization, in face of the colossal task of the surveillance of four millions of people, whom science and civilization were every day furnishing with fresh weapons for crime and increased facilities for escaping detection. The leading journal was some time ago congratulating the age on the fact that it was becoming more and more difficult for the criminal to slip from the hands of justice. That is probably true in cases where the crime and the criminal are known, and it is only a question of verifying the facts of the one, and of detecting and catching the other. But those who thoughtfully study the crimes that do come to light, or the lurid flashes that are sometimes emitted by casual circumstances in criminal investigations or death-bed confessions, will be convinced that there are vast catacombs of underground crime which are never illumined even by the taper of justice, and still less laid bare to the sunlight of publicity. If our book—by showing how conceivable it is, without any violation of probabilities, in the present state of science and organization of society, that great crimes may be committed with a reasonable possibility of escaping detection—should only help to excite attention to a secret and tremendous peril which underruns our complicated civilization, we shall not grudge our critics the pleasure of discrediting it as a work of art.

At the Home Office the minister, the chief commissioner, and the

chief of the Detective Department* were met in conclave on the morning of Saturday, the 29th of June. Between twenty and thirty dockets were spread out on the table. On the mantel-piece stood a large bottle or glass jar of spirits, and in it could be discerned a white body, held in suspense by a silken thread, depending from the center of a large cork. It was a human hand. The Home Secretary, who for purposes of social and political tactics is short-sighted, had been, for the twentieth time, examining it through his large gold *pince-nez.*

"I would give," he said, with a sort of sigh, as he took off his glasses and tapped with them on the bottle, "a thousand pounds to know whose hand that was. We are here," he continued, turning round with the pomp and solemnity of manner which were habitual with him—"we are here in the presence, Sir Henry, of one of the most singular and horrible mysteries that ever startled the nerves of civilized society or taxed the ingenuity of justice."

The chief commissioner, as a born Englishman, was a lover and an utterer of platitudes; but his were the platitudes of a man of business and fact, and not those of the statesman or philosopher. He was eminently practical, and did not appreciate very highly the pompous and sonorous periods of his chief. The statement, however, was beyond controversy, and he appeared to accept it with becoming respect.

"True," he said, "Sir Walter Grandison, I have never heard of a more extraordinary case; and these papers and letters only make it more difficult to unravel the mystery. You have read them—what do you think?"

The head of the Detective Department was sitting a little apart, with his lips firmly closed, his head on one side, his elbow resting on his knee, his thumb turning his hat slowly round on the flat of the hand. He watched his two chiefs with an air of mingled respect and compassion, his bright eye twinkling the while in a cunning manner, as if to say—"If you gentlemen would leave it to me, and offer a good sound reward, I should soon unravel the 'mystery,' as my chief elegantly remarks."

"I think," said Sir Walter Grandison, in reply to the commissioner, "that there is 'something rotten in the State of Denmark.' The number of disappearances is simply phenomenal, and significant of a state of society which is a melancholy reflection on our national and social morality."

The Home Secretary seemed to be elaborating a leading article for "The Thunderer."

"Dash it!" said the chief commissioner to himself. To the Home Secretary he said—"True, Sir Walter Grandison, but, with your permission, I meant to inquire of you, as a lawyer and Home Secretary, what is your opinion about these cases."

"Well," replied the minister, "if you mean have I formed any theory about them, I confess I have not. Some of them appear to

*We believe the more correct title of this functionary is "Chief of the Criminal Investigation Office;" but we do not draw any of these portraits from life, and as the main purpose of the story is not affected by the character or details of the police organization, our sketch of it is rather an ideal than a real one, in some respects perhaps showing more what it ought to be than what it is.

be genuine, some to be hoaxes. One or two of them seem to suggest lines of investigation which it would be worth our while to follow up; but, on the other hand, one hardly knows where to begin. If these papers are to be believed in, we are asked to clear up a dozen private romances. We have neither time nor money to waste in frivolous inquiries. Is there any one of these cases, which, in your opinion, points more suggestively than the rest to an answer to our enigma?"

"I can hardly say that, Sir Walter, but I have gone through them with some pains, and have analyzed them carefully. Some, as you know, are letters, some are reports which have been taken down at Scoland Yard or other police-stations, from the mouths of people coming forward with information—as usual, these statements are mostly illusory on the face of them, and of no value. Many stupid people have a morbid desire to mix themselves up in criminal affairs—others of these statements are anonymous. And one naturally questions the good faith of anonymous communications. They generally proceed from two classes—confederates or imbeciles—the latter preponderating. Yet, now and then an anonymous communication may be worth attention. One can readily conceive that there may be personal or family reasons why the writers do not wish to be known. There are others which are obvious hoaxes. It is hardly credible, but it is true, that there is a class of persons so low and base in their moral sentiments as to fancy it is a clever or humorous thing to hoax the police. Two or three come from the clubs, from idle men, who, I believe, abound there—you know probably more about that than I do—" The minister bowed with a smile, for he was a member of the Whig Club—"They are our old friends the officers of the army, who seem to have nothing better to do than to write ridiculous letters to every department of State, and to the public press, whenever anything happens about which they think they know something. This one, for instance, from a Lieutenant-colonel Smith, a retired Indian officer, dated from Bermondsey, where he seems to be hiding his laurels on half-pay or a pension. It is worth reading. He says:

"'It may be of some interest to the police, and may possibly give them some clew to the mystery of the Regent Circus, to learn that, on the morning of Thursday, the 26th inst., at twenty minutes past nine in the morning, I took the omnibus from Grange Road, Bermondsey, for the Bank of England, in order to attend a meeting of The People's Cooked Meat Company, Limited, of which I am a director, and that I distinctly noticed sitting opposite to me a short, stout man, apparently of about fifty or fifty-five years of age, of florid complexion, and clad in a suit of rusty black. This man attracted my attention by the singularity of his manner. He was breathing heavily, as if he had been running, and he wiped his head, which was nearly bald, with an old bandana pocket-handkerchief, such as one was accustomed to see used by military men in India, when serving the East India Company, or the Government of India, as I have had the honor to do for nearly forty years, having joined the company's service at the early age of twenty. His agitated manner led me to watch him closely, and I overheard him say to his neighbor, who appeared to be a friend (or confederate), "I had a narrow

squeak for it. I wouldn't be late for twenty pounds," or words to that effect, indicating a great desire to get into the City, which I need not remind you would be on the direct way to Regent Circus. But the most remarkable fact is to come. When we arrived in King William Street, City, he took out of his pocket an old portemonnaie, which I observed contained only a few silver and copper coins, and as he picked out the fare to give it to the conductor, with his right hand, I observed that the back of it was covered with hairs of a reddish color, and his little finger which he held stuck out from the others, was crooked at the upper joint! Arrived at the Mansion House, he jumped quickly out of the omnibus and ran down Lombard Street, after exclaiming to his friend "Sovey!" (? French *Suavé*) "I've five minutes to spare." I have little doubt in my own mind, from the descriptions I have read in the public press, that this was the very individual who came to so lamentable an end in the circus, and I strongly advise the police to make inquiries in Bermondsey as to whether any person of the description I have given is missing from that district. I may add that I am certain if I saw the hand I should know it again. And I am quite prepared, if my omnibus fare is paid, to come to Scotland Yard to identify the hand now in the possession of the police, and I may, at the same time, be able to give them some valuable hints as to the manner in which the inquiry should be conducted, having on several occasions in India assisted the commissioner of the Ponderababoo District in his investigations into crimes committed by the natives, and received the thanks of the lieutenant-governor for my services.'

"There," said the chief commissioner, throwing the letter on the table; "could such an imbecile production as that have emanated from any one but an ex-army officer with nothing to do, and no brains to do it with?"

The Home Secretary smiled and the chief of the detectives grinned, without opening his lips; a curious and ghastly operation, of which only a favored few are capable, while living, and his small eyes twinkled again.

"Preposterous!" said the minister, shrugging his large shoulders. "But you have more important communications than that. I remember one or two struck me very forcibly."

"Quite so. But I was about to remark, in continuation of my analysis, that some of these communications clearly overlap one another, and refer to the same cases. Others are quite apocryphal. But the next result of my analysis is that some thirteen persons are missing, of whom three are stated to have finger-joints injured, and six a deformity of the little finger. Even that is an incredible number when we consider that they are declared to have become missing within the past fortnight, and that the number of persons in the population with deformed little finger-joints must be a minute fraction, say, at a guess, not one quarter or one fifth of one per cent. But admit one half of one per cent. out of four millions, that would be one half of forty thousand—or twenty thousand persons. Of that twenty thousand six disappear in a fortnight, or three per week, making 156 per annum, exactly 7 decimal 80 in the thousand, and the normal death-rate from all causes, for the entire population, is only about 26 per thousand! You see it is impossible,

and yet these people who send us the information appear to be quite sincere, giving minute particulars, names, addresses, ages, description, and so on."

"Have you made any inquiries at the places indicated?" asked the minister.

"Not yet, at all of them, but the police report—do they not, Sontag?—that four of the cases appear to be authentic."

"They do, Sir Henry," answered the detective, shutting his mouth up sharp after letting out these words, as if he were apprehensive lest others should run out of it, as the shot used to do out of the old-fashioned shot-belts, unless they were cunningly handled.

"Hum!" said the Home Secretary. "It is very odd!"

The chief detective shifted in his chair and changed legs, and with a preliminary "hem!" to attract the attention of his superior, he said:

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Secretary and Commissioner, that perhaps some of these letters were written expressly to throw us off the track?"

The Home Secretary, struck by the observation, looked round sharply, first at the detective and then at the chief commissioner.

"Of course that too has occurred to me," said Sir Henry. "It is so old a trick. But just think how wide and important a combination would be needed to carry out a plot for misleading us in five or six different cases, by a new and different fiction each time! We are agreed in discarding the notion that Fenianism has played any part in this drama, and I can conceive of no other organization which could command either the resources or the machinery for such a plot."

"I am not so sure, Mr. Commissioner," said Mr. Sontag. "This is a very curious, profound, and ingenious problem. I can not bring myself to believe that this is a case of suicide. It is hardly conceivable that any one contemplating suicide would be so diabolical as to commit it in this fashion, in the middle of a crowd, where the lives of many other persons might have been sacrificed along with his own."

"But it could scarcely have been a murder!" cried the minister. "There is not a tittle of evidence that any one in the crowd threw a cartridge or bomb in that neighborhood. Besides, the person who did it would himself have run considerable risk."

"True, Mr. Secretary," replied Mr. Sontag, "I have put that aside as impossible. Moreover, the statement of the lad Lightbones is clearly against it, as well as the other circumstances. The man seems to have blown up spontaneously from within. Now, no one ever heard of gases being generated in the human system of sufficient force to produce this explosion. The man must have been carrying the explosive on his person—probably in his coat or trousers pocket."

"Precisely. Then he knew it was there. You can't escape from that conclusion. Well, then, he was either carrying it innocently or with some criminal intention. He was going to try some experiment or commit some crime—in which I include suicide. If his intentions were innocent, then it is a case of involuntary suicide. He has punished himself for his carelessness and a breach of the law. If with

criminal intention, then one of two hypotheses—the stuff went off prematurely, and again he was punished for a breach of the law; or it was sent off of set purpose, in which case it is a suicide. *Quod erat demonstrandum*, Mr. Sontag," said the Home Secretary, with a triumphant smile.

The detective gave his lips a tight squeeze for a moment, as if they were a sponge with which he was going to wipe away the minister's sophisms as tidily as possible, and said,

"Pardon me, Sir Walter Grandison, there is another hypothesis, which you have rejected, but to which you will forgive me for recalling your attention?"

"What?"

"The man may have had the explosive on his person without knowing it. You, Sir Walter, have assumed that that was impossible."

"Good gracious, Sontag!" put in the chief commissioner, "that is altogether beyond the bounds of probability!"

"I don't know, Sir Henry. It has occurred to me--may this not have been an ingenious and infernal plot to put out of the way some man who was obnoxious to powerful and wealthy persons, in such a manner as to destroy his identity, and to divert attention from the real criminals by the singularity and daring of the means employed?"

"Oh! Then you come back again to Fenianism?"

"No. I am agreed with you in rejecting the idea that there was any political motive in this crime."

"Then what other motive can you possibly conceive of for such an infernal plot?" inquired the minister.

"Well, you know, sir, that we modern detectives are very cautious about allowing ourselves to be drawn away from the main object—that of discovering the facts—by theories as to motive. Still it is sometimes useful to try and evolve some theory. I should reply to your question thus: Perhaps some very rich or eminent person, or family, had a paramount reason for wishing to get rid of this man, and a plot directed by the most clever and diabolical ingenuity we have ever had to deal with was formed to destroy him, in such a way, so suddenly and completely, and under such conditions, that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to establish his identity, and that the police should be led to adopt the theory that it was a political crime or an act of political vengeance."

"Pooh! Mr. Sontag," said the chief commissioner, looking at Mr. Sontag with some disappointment expressed in his face, "we are not living in the thirteenth century in Venice or Rome, or in the days of Louis the Fourteenth, or even of Frederick the Great."

"I have read history," said Mr. Sontag, "and the result of my reading is to convince me that human nature is always the same, and that the same sort of crimes can be and will be committed in modern society as in those of ancient Rome or the Middle Ages. Every development of intellectualism has been followed by fresh developments of crime. When the human mind is quickened into movement, that movement will not confine itself to one direction, the good and the healthy one. The movement pervades the entire social being, and arouses the evil faculties as well as the good to excep-

tional activity. In our day the improvements in the organization of society for self-protection and defense impose upon the criminal a greater caution and ingenuity in regard to the methods employed, and science has made it necessary to use more intelligence and address; but we must not forget that, if science assists us in detection, it also puts into the hands of the criminal weapons more powerful, more sure, more secret, and difficult of discovery, and far more formidable, than those which were employed in the times of which you speak."

Mr. Sontag had grown quite eloquent. He had drawn himself up. He no longer looked like the subordinate, awkwardly sitting by to be instructed by his superiors; he had assumed rather the tone and manner of a pedagogue lecturing his pupils. The Home Secretary was more struck by this alteration in Mr. Sontag's manner than the chief commissioner, who knew his man. For Sontag was a type of the modern detective, instructed, reflective, philosophic. An Englishman by birth, he was, as his name implied, a German by descent on his father's side, and he united much of the imaginative temperament of the German with the practical qualities of the Englishman.

The two superiors remaining silent for a few moments with astonishment at Mr. Sontag's sudden evolution, he ventured to go on:

"I have told you before, Sir Henry, that I can only account for one or two remarkable crimes which have happened of late years, and which we have attempted in vain to elucidate, by supposing that they were committed at the instance of some wealthy and unscrupulous person or persons, whose position and character were menaced, and to whom a large expenditure of money, in order to assure absolute secrecy and immunity from punishment, was a matter of no consequence. You remember the case of that young French lady who was found dead in her room in her lodgings in Moulton Street? She was about to become a mother. You know we had reason to believe that she had been met and seduced in Paris by one of our most wealthy and respectable London bankers, a youngish man, M.P., in good society, and who had lately married into an aristocratic family in England. The girl herself was of a noble French family, but in reduced circumstances. They knew nothing whatever about the *liaison*, and when she came to England they supposed she was in Normandy. It was certain the intimacy had continued off and on for two years, and yet all the researches of the Paris police could not discover where and how they had met. Only one person could be found who knew anything about it —a woman friend, to whom she had confided her condition, and to whom she had written one letter from London. The poor lady, having heard of his marriage, had come here resolved to make him settle a handsome fortune on her and her child, or else to denounce him. That she had seen him once in London we knew from that single letter. In it she referred to his name only by initials. Her friend had never seen him, did not know his name. In her letter she said she had asked him to settle on her half a million of francs, which proved that she believed him to be a man of princely wealth. She was a beautiful woman, and everything about her—her dress, toilet, baggage, jewels—all showed that, whoever he was, the man

had entertained her in a handsome manner. Well, no evidence whatever could be obtained of that interview. No one had ever seen the man with her in London—no one in Paris. In London, as her letter stated, and as we knew from her landlady, she made the acquaintance of a Frenchwoman, who was no doubt put on her track. This woman pretended to be able and anxious to help her. One day she was ill. The Frenchwoman said she would send her a French doctor. She went away, and was never seen again. We could find no trace of her. But the so-called doctor came in the evening at nine o'clock. He remained in the lady's room about half an hour. He was a short slight man, of delicate features, and wearing a small dark mustache and imperial, and dressed in a light gray ulster. When he left he stated that he had given her a sleeping mixture, and that she was not to be disturbed. The landlady, however, went into the room before going to bed and found her lodger motionless—dead—an empty bottle, marked 'Laudanum,' by her side. This was a blind. The English doctor who was called in was —— of Brook Street, a very clever fellow. He noticed a peculiar odor about the face, and some appearance of the skin, which was very fine and delicate, as if a strong irritant had been applied to the face. There were traces of the same odor on her night-dress and the pillow, as if the essence had been used in considerable quantity, and possibly in the course of a struggle had been scattered about. The stomach, on examination, contained no traces whatever of poison."

"How, then, was it done?" said the minister.

"Dr. —— said he had no doubt it was done by applying to her face a piece of linen saturated with a mixture of chloroform and prussic acid—in fact, the same mixture which killed the celebrated Dr. Toynbee while he was experimenting on its effects on the ear. Dr. ——'s opinion was that it was applied like a mask, the linen being placed under oil-silk, which he said would increase the irritant power of the chloroform, and accounted for the reddened appearance of the skin. All her letters and papers had disappeared, but there was no robbery of valuables. Now, Sir Henry, have you ever been satisfied with the view of the coroner's jury that this last visitor was the lover who had seduced her, and who murdered her? We never found the man in the gray ulster, and I will tell you why. I am persuaded we should have looked for a woman. Moreover, I always had a suspicion that, earnest as you and I were to penetrate this mystery, we never had a chance. Our subordinates never worked at it with any energy. There was something behind that. The man who was concerned could afford to pay handsomely to suppress the pursuit—and did. Nay, I will say more. There was some solicitor in London, who knew all about it, and who managed the business for the millionaire. But you see there was no evidence whatever to fix him; and when we made a delicate approach to him he was very indignant, and said he knew nothing whatever about the woman. We had nothing beyond those initials in the letter, and the poor lady's description of his personal appearance, which is a striking one, and so there we had to leave it—a mystery to be cleared up at the day of judgment, if there ever is one."

"Never mind about the day of judgment, Mr. Sontag. Your Straussism is your own private affair, and is better omitted from

your official appreciations. I am afraid that all you say and suspect about that case is only too near the mark," said the chief commissioner. "I have always been dissatisfied about it. The truth is that, without absolute proof, we can not risk charges against people of high position and great wealth. As you say, they have an immense power of purchasing or securing the suppression of evidence."

"Well, Sir Henry, why may not this case be one of the kind I have referred to? It is not an ordinary case. Though, on the face of it, it looks so vulgar and stupid, and outrageous, it is altogether too mysterious to be accounted for by any commonplace theories. Take my word for it, the real criminals—for I am sure it was no suicide—are either political conspirators, and that I don't believe, for, if I am not mistaken, the man was an Englishman, and neither Fenian, Nihilist, nor Socialist—or they are people who are of such position and wealth that, when these were menaced, they would hardly hesitate to commit any crime or go to any expense to save themselves from discovery."

"There is something behind all this, Sontag," said the chief commissioner, looking at his subordinate sharply. "You have some information?"

Mr. Sontag smiled without parting his lips.

"Out with it, man! What is it you have found out? Several of these letters point to a political motive."

"Precisely, Sir Henry," said Mr. Sontag. "And having examined them closely, I am satisfied with regard to those, that, though they are in different handwritings, they all came from the same source. They are simply red herrings trailed across our path. The same man composed them all; he is a lawyer. The turns of expression are similar in each, in spite of his effort to vary them, which proves that he is a legal practitioner accustomed to one formal manner of expression, and not a man of high literary culture or practice in style. The style is that of a solicitor, and a clever one. But you are right, I have some information, and I will tell you why I am certain that this is not a political outrage."

"Come now," said the minister, settling himself down in his chair and looking at Mr. Sontag with interest, "this looks more like business. Go on, please."

"Well, sir, the boy Lightbones is a sharp boy, a peer's servant, and none are quicker than gentlemen's servants to detect a real gentleman from a false when they see one. He tells me that, from the view he had of the man, he is certain he was a 'gentleman.'"

"Why he only saw him for two or three seconds, did he?" said the Home Secretary.

"And for a sharp-eyed boy, Mr. Minister, that I hold was enough. Take my own case. I have a trained eye, not so quick as Houdin's, but pretty quick for all that. Give me a full, fair glimpse of a man, dressed on a summer day, standing in broad day light on a pavement, and I think I could rely pretty well on the correctness of my appreciation of the general character of the objective personality in question."

Mr. Sontag's German side was turning outward.

"But, surely," said the Home Secretary, who evinced more interest in the philosophic appreciations of Mr. Sontag than he had

in the discussion of the *pros* and *cons* of actual facts, "you couldn't tell whether your 'objective personality,' as you term it, was a banker or a doctor?"

"No, Mr. Secretary, I don't think I could go into those refinements in so short a time, though, with a few minutes' observation, I could guess correctly, in nine cases out of ten, even so closely as that. But I could tell you, Sir Walter, with some confidence, whether he was an aristocrat or a tradesman or a workman. I could tell you whether he was a gentleman, by which I mean belonging to the cultivated classes and the professions, or a shopman or a publican or a swell-mobsman; I might even, I think, tell you whether he was a military man or a civilian, an actor or a jockey, a gentleman out at elbows or a servant out of place, but I could not, without closer study, go into the finer shades of character. There is really nothing extraordinary about this. The rapidity of observation is the artist's faculty. He has a quick glance, which takes in all the outlines, all the details of form and color; and the real artist has, besides that, an intuitive sense of the character of the object he looks at. Every good detective is an artist with the poetry suppressed—"

"I should tell you, Sir Walter," said the chief commissioner, who seemed pleased at the way in which his subordinate was coming out, "that Mr. Sontag's art is not suppressed. He has exhibited some very pretty pictures at the Water-color Society's Exhibition."

Mr. Sontag's face took on a sort of faint water-color blush at his chief's compliment, and he went on:

"When natural quickness of observation is trained, then you get, as in Houdin's case, almost miraculous results. You remember he could pass a shop-window at a walk and afterward catalogue and describe every object in it. However, I only wished to explain that it is quite possible young Lightbones is correct in his appreciation of the person he saw. I had him for an hour in a window in Parliament Street and tested him by making him glance rapidly at passers-by, while I said, 'One, two, three,' and he rarely made a mistake in distinguishing a 'gentleman' from persons well dressed, but obviously belonging to the classes that work and trade. His power of seeing and appreciating is exceptionally rapid, and it strikes me he would make a good detective, for he is sharp as needles. He even thinks now that he could recognize the man's face if he saw a photograph. I questioned him closely. The figure evidently made a vivid impression, which came back after the fright was over. I took a note of his recollections—such as they are. 'Large, square face, rather brown-black bushy eyebrows—nose round'—he saw the front face, and a large, prominent nose would give that impression at a hasty glance—'mouth quite straight—it seemed like a slit in a money-box'—that is a very striking and important detail—'big, square chin—whiskers, dark hair, no beard or mustache.' You observe the lad has a pretty fair picture of the man in his memory. Now we have minute descriptions of all the Fenian suspects on both sides of the Atlantic, but none resemble this. Again, the boy's impression of the man's age is that it was over fifty. His hand confirms it. The surgeons say it is not the hand of a workman,

and you can see it is not. Though it is muscular, it is a gentleman's hand. The nails are well kept, it is white and soft, not a hand accustomed to tools, though it might have managed a cricket bat or a pair of oars with strength and address. The Fenians may have among them persons who have been clerks or professional men of a low order, but they certainly have no gentlemen. I abandon the Irish theory altogether. Well, then, it is said a chemist or mining-engineer may have been taking home some nitro-glycerine to experiment upon. But you see we have not had a single person of that description reported to us as missing. Here is the list. A barrister—they are always disappearing; it is a precarious profession for any but a solicitor's son. Two solicitors—ditto—they, however, generally take something with them. A clergyman—perhaps gone over to Rome. A 'gentleman,' that is, a person of no occupation—we are inquiring about him—and a financial agent—I wonder there is only one this week—a stock-broker. Lastly, there is a gentleman of some position and importance, the agent or steward of the Earl of Selby, who came up from Yorkshire on the 20th, and was to have met the earl in his house in Portman Square at five o'clock on Thursday afternoon and never turned up. This gentleman's name was Barton."

"Lord Selby's steward!" cried the Home Secretary. "Why, Lord Selby is a relative, and was the guardian of Lord Tilbury. What an odd coincidence!"

"The coincidence would be even more odd were the very man who was blown up to turn out to be this same Mr. Barton. In my opinion, we should adopt the theory, odd as it may seem, that the victim is this Mr. Barton, and devote our best attention to elucidating his fate."

The minister and the chief commissioner looked earnestly at Mr. Sontag.

"What can be running in your head?" said the commissioner.

"In the first place, sir, Mr. Barton's little finger had a peculiarity which answers to that of the hand on the mantel-piece. The peculiarity was congenital. The surgeons declare that the crook of the joint in this hand is congenital. In the second place, the description given of Mr. Barton answers to the description given by Lightbones. Unhappily, that gentleman always objected to sit for his photograph, so that we can not use that means of identification. The only portrait of him is a painting twenty years old. In the third place, his son, who was with me last evening, is prepared to swear that that is his father's hand."

Both the high officials started.

"Why the —— didn't you tell us all this before," said the Home Secretary, peevishly, "instead of wasting our time in generalities?"

'Because, Mr. Secretary, the evidence is, unfortunately, far from conclusive, and a charge has been lodged against Mr. Barton by the Earl of Selby's own solicitors of having run away with a quantity of bonds."

"Hum! It seems to be a pretty kettle of fish."

"Fourthly, Sir Walter and Mr. Commissioner, I have an extraordinary piece of evidence—the minutest piece of evidence that ever was produced in a court of justice. Ten minutes before the catas-

trophe Mr. Barton was in the shop of Lund, the watch-maker, in Regent Street. He called for a watch he had left to be cleaned and put in order. I went there this morning. Well, I walked out of Lund's shop, and leisurely up Regent Street toward the Circus, which they told me was the direction he had taken in leaving the shop, with my watch in my hand. It took me exactly nine minutes and fifty two seconds to reach the spot where the catastrophe of Thursday occurred."

"Singular!" said the home secretary, with an air of raillery, and giving his left eyelid, which was nearest the chief commissioner, a sort of twitch, which might, in a less majestic person, have been taken for a wink. "You don't mean to say, Mr. Sontag, that you believe that a man who was about to blow himself up in Regent Circus would call for his watch, to take it with him into the other world, do you?"

"Mr. Secretary, with submission, I don't think the individual in question blew himself up at all."

"Well, but really, Mr. Sontag, who could have blown him up?"

"That is the question," said Mr. Sontag, shutting his lips up tight, and squeezing his eyes almost to pin-points.

The two great officials now experienced a reaction against the favorable opinion they had formed of the chief detective's astuteness. They began to feel that the German and philosophic side of his nature was getting the better of his practical sense. Mr. Sontag realized this change in their feelings.

"I beg pardon, gentlemen," he said, "I will produce this minute piece of evidence which has had so strong an influence on my mind."

He took out a *porte-monnaie*, opened it cautiously, extracted from it a small piece of folded white paper, extracted again from that a second piece of folded paper, looking like a baby's powder. Holding it carefully aside, so as not to breathe upon it, he rose and approached the Home Secretary. The chief commissioner also rose, and came nearer. The moment was evidently, in Mr. Sontag's opinion, a solemn one.

"Pardon me, Mr. Secretary—Mr. Commissioner—will you kindly hold your breath while I open this paper?"

He pushed back the edge of the paper with his forefingers very gingerly. He had the air of a prestidigitator who is about to perform a miraculous trick, which he knows will succeed and confound all skepticism.

In the middle of the paper was a speck about the size of a lady's patch, but instead of being black it was white.

Taking out of his pocket a magnifying-glass, the detective presented it to the home secretary, and turning away his face so as not to breathe on the paper, but keeping one eye on the precious morsel all the while, he said,

"Do you see, Sir Walter?"

The minister, who had grown red in the face, turned his nose away, and drew a deep breath, as he handed the glass to the chief commissioner.

"I see," he said, "a small piece of white enamel, and on it three very small letters, which I make out to be HAM."

Sir Henry, who had examined the thing, nodded.

"Precisely," said the detective, as he cautiously refolded the paper. "And what do you make of that?"

"There is no use in putting conundrums to us," said the Home Secretary, testily. "Be good enough to tell us, Mr. Sontag, what you make of it."

"Well, Mr. Minister, and Sir Henry," said the detective, gravely, "the watch which Mr. Barton usually carried, and which he had on him that day, for he took it out of his pocket and had it set by Lund's chronometer, was a beautiful chronometer watch, with a white face, and the maker was Frodsham, of the Strand."

The two officials started.

"The other watch, which he had left to be overhauled, was a Swiss watch, a valuable one, and he said he meant to give it to his son. Now if I can prove that this minute piece of white enamel, bearing the last three letters of the name of Frodsham—letters precisely like those of a veritable Frodsham, which I have this morning obtained from the maker"—he took out of his pocket a watch, and touching the spring of the case, disclosed a white watch-face, bearing the maker's name in letters incontestably similar to those on the piece of enamel—"if, I say, I can prove that this piece of enamel came from the body of the man who was killed in the Circus, will that have any influence on your minds?"

"Where did you get that fragment?" cried the chief commissioner, astounded.

"You remember, Sir Henry, that a Yorkshire bailiff named Hilton was close to the scene of the catastrophe at the time, and was sprinkled with the remains of the deceased? Yesterday I submitted the clothes to a careful examination with a powerful glass. Hilton was wearing a homespun suit. At the fold of the collar I found a clot of blood, and held, partly by the clot and partly by the wool, I discovered a minute fragment of metal or glass, which nearly escaped me. I was curious. I took it and placed it in a wine-glass, and washed it. You have seen what it is. I instantly guessed it was part of a watch-face, and I examined the names of all the watch-makers in the directory for any which gave the combination of letters existing on the fragment. My inquiries lead me to suspect, at least, that this may be a portion of Mr. Barton's watch, and if it could only be proved that it was, I should require no further proof of the identity of Mr. Barton with the subject of our problem. His son was with me last night. He is a clever and reticent young man, but after learning all that I have just told you, he stated that he was satisfied that his father was the person who had perished in the Circus, and that he should act accordingly. My belief is that he entertains similar suspicions to my own, for some reasons known only to himself, and which I could not induce him to disclose. But I shall know them," added Mr. Sontag, shutting his lips with a quick movement, and nodding his head.

"But," said the chief commissioner, "Lord Selby and Lord Selby's solicitors have been moving heaven and earth to discover Mr. Barton's whereabouts—they say he has run away with a lot of important and valuable papers. I really can not understand, Mr. Sontag, what direction your suspicions are pointing in."

Mr. Sontag still kept his mouth tightly shut, and put on the air of a man who would say, "Oh, well! Think what you like—I know what I am about:" but it was aggravating that he did not impart any further grounds for his convictions.

"Whew!" ejaculated the Home Secreary, throwing himself back in his chair and addressing the ceiling. "Let me see. The young Earl of Tilbury's mother is a Selby. The old Earl of Selby, her father, and father of the present Earl of Selby, was very fond of her, and he also took a fancy to his grandson, Lord Tilbury. You know he did not live in England latterly; he lived on the Continent and never saw his son, the present earl, for twenty years before his death. There had been a deadly quarrel between them about the late Countess of Selby. His rental was over thirty thousand a year. He was close-fisted, and saved, and purchased Linton, which he left, I believe, to Lady Tilbury for life, with remainder to her son, and a lot of money besides. She has always been on good terms with her brother Selby, who succeeded to the family estates. The late Earl of Tilbury left a colossal fortune, and constituted the present Earl of Selby and Fairway, the banker, executors and guardians of young Tilbury. Fairway died about eight years ago. Tilbury came of age last February—you remember all the fuss about it—nearly all the English nobility took part in the rejoicings, which were held in a dozen counties. The Earl of Selby is absolutely above suspicion of any kind, one of the wealthiest and most distinguished men in the peerage. If your suspicions, Mr. Sontag, point at him, I must tell you frankly they are simply absurd. You are only wasting time. These coincidences you mention are curious, certainly, but you see yourself you have nothing conclusive. You must look somewhere else, Mr. Sontag."

The detective only pursed up his eyes more tightly and remained silent. The chief commissioner was thoughtful and said nothing, but the subordinate read dissatisfaction in the face of his chief, and seeing that it was useless to pursue the subject any further at that moment, he took up his hat to go.

"Good-day, Mr. Sontag," said the Home Secretary, in a tone half ironic, half earnest. "Do not allow your Teutonic love of poetry and mystery to get the better of your sound English common-sense. There is no Vehmgericht in England, and although royal princes and noblemen may be freemasons, no English peer will become the associate of conspirators and assassins."

Mr. Sontag bowed, and went away.

"He is a clever fellow," said the chief commissioner, when his subordinate had disappeared, "but I notice that sometimes he has a tendency to proceed rather by intuition than by induction."

"Ha!" replied the Home Secretary, with a smile. "If you were married, Sir Henry, you would known how frequently people who do that make wonderfully sharp hits."

Sir Henry laughed and took his leave.

CHAPTER III.

IS HE SINCERE?

On the morning of Monday, the 30th of June, at about eleven o'clock, a young man, carefully dressed in deep mourning, and who, though he did not exhibit that subtle distinction and quiet assurance of carriage which is given by a consciousness of aristocratic birth and social eminence, yet had the appearance and manner of one who has been accustomed to mix in the best society, presented himself at the door of the great family mansion of the Tilburys, in Grosvenor Place, one of the largest and most imposing, if not the least ugly, of the structures which, some twenty years since, shouldered out of that aristocratic quarter the dingy brick shops and dwellings erected nearly a century before by the original lessees of the Duke of Westminster.

The gray-headed servant, who, to answer the modest appeal of the bell, had emerged from his leather-hooded seat in the hall, where he had been perusing at his ease the "Morning Post," and who bore on his wrinkled face the traces of sleeplessness and anxiety, started when he saw the young gentleman who was standing under the portico.

"Is her ladyship at home, Simpson?" said the visitor.

"What, is it you, Master Barton? How you have changed to be sure! You have grown a mustache. Will you please to come in a moment? though you can't see her ladyship."

The young gentleman, who appeared to have great self-possession, said nothing until the old man had shut the door and turned toward him. He glanced rapidly round the great hall, with its marble floor, its scagliola pillars and panels, its lofty ceiling *à la* Renaissance, violently gilded and painted by Italian artists, its furniture of rich mahogany, and the heavy Moorish curtains which acted as *portières* between the outer and inner hall, and said, in a low voice,

"Is there any one within hearing?"

"No, Mr. Barton," replied the man. "The two footmen are down-stairs having something to eat. You know everything is upset here. We are kept up all night—hardly getting any sleep—doctors coming and going—people calling to inquire—look at that basket of cards—there's bushels of 'em in the library—lawyers prowling about, and what not. I tell you, Master George, I don't know whether I'm standing on my head or my feet. I've had no sleep for four nights, since they brought my lord home senseless. And there he is now, lying just as he came in a Thursday night, and we every minute expecting to hear that it's all over with him, poor fellow! Oh, Master George! Master George! I don't know what I'm doing or saying, and can hardly hold myself up!" And the old man sunk down in his great chair, and covered his eyes for a moment with his skinny hand.

"It is dreadful!" said the young gentleman, in a short, hard tone, the lines of his face setting like those of a wooden image. His com-

plexion was brown and dark, his face one of great and striking power, not handsome, but agreeable; a straight, prominent nose, with finely-chiseled nostrils, brown eyes of extraordinary depth and luminosity, the luminosity which gives such magnetic power to a dark eye; hair almost black, coming down in a mass over a broad forehead, low but full, in which the organs of perception were strongly but finely marked; and his well-shaped eyebrows projected over the eyes, adding to their singular beauty and power. Under a dark mustache, cut straight across the lips, a mouth straight, thin-lipped, resolute, and below a deep square chin, closely shaven. He was not tall, but his broad shoulders, erect and robust body, and the firmness with which he held himself on his feet, as well as the muscular appearance of the right hand, which was ungloved, and browned by the sun and air, testified to considerable strength. Had any one looked closely at the hand, he would have seen that its back was covered with short, downy hairs, and that the nail-joint of the little finger being slightly, almost imperceptibly, bent inward, could not be straightened with the rest of the fingers.

He remained silent for a minute, while old Simpson kept his eyes covered with his hand. When he removed it they looked red and fatigued.

"Simpson," said the young man, "I want to see the countess—in fact, I must see her."

"You, Mr. George!" cried Simpson, in an accent of surprise. "Why you know that you can't see her! I have had to shut the door in the face of her dearest friends. Why, there's been telegrams here from royalty, and I don't believe she's even seen 'em—the earl answers them. She even refused to see Mr. Pollard—he's her man of business, you know—and he's been here three times, and said he must see her—just as you say—but it ain't no use; she won't leave the earl's room. I don't know that Lord Selby has spoken to her yet."

"Has the earl been here?"

"Been here? He's here almost all the time. He sees 'most everybody. He's here now. Will you see him? Perhaps that's what you want?"

"No," replied the young man, with an emphasis and a deepness of tone which would have struck a more intelligent observer than the hall-porter as significant of some powerful emotion.

He paused a moment, looking irresolutely at Simpson. Then he seemed to take a sudden decision.

"Simpson," he said, "you knew my father was lost?"

"Lord bless my soul! Of course I heard it, Master George. Why—my head is so upset that it never struck me when I saw you—why, the earl is in a terrible way about it, so his people say. Ay! your father! There's been detectives with his lordship, one of his gentlemen told me. And they do say— I beg pardon, Mr. George: I was forgetting myself: you and your father was always respected in our circle, you know."

The young man's eyes glowed so at the moment when the fatal gossip was coming out that Simpson stopped, alarmed.

"Well, go on, Simpson," he said, in a dry, hard voice. "What do they say?"

"They say he has gone off with papers worth hundreds of thousands of pounds."

"It's a lie!" said the young man.

Then suddenly checking himself and recovering his dignity, he made a tremendous effort to subdue the violent flame in his eyes and the terrible contraction his features had undergone as he uttered the denial.

"Simpson," said George Barton, solemnly, and with a forced gentleness of tone and manner, "my father is dead."

By a gesture he showed the servant his hat, which bore a broad mourning-band.

"Dead!" exclaimed the old man. "Mr. Barton dead! It can't be, Mr. George. Why only an hour ago, as the Earl of Selby were talking there, at the foot of the staircase, with Sir Alfred Marks, Sir Alfred says, 'Heard anything of your steward yet, my lord?' And the earl says, 'No, d—n him. I expect he's in Spain by this time.'"

"H'm," said George Barton, grimly, half to himself, "Lord Selby also has his *chateaux en Espagne!* He does not know that my father is dead, eh?"

"Who is that talking so freely about Lord Selby?" said a sharp, clear-toned voice, as the thick curtains were thrust aside by a nervous hand, while a long, thin, and strangely powerful face was pushed forward, and two keen gray eyes peered into the hall; one of those faces which carry the marks of a thousand storms, a thousand varied experiences—of passions dead, of passions still aglow, of intellect worn and weary, of intellect still quick and active, of faded hopes and living ambitions, of desires extinct, of desires unsatiated—with coolness, reserve, audacity, hauteur, shrewdness, force, all shown together: in the gray eyes, with their corners drawn down by a network of wrinkles; in the full lips, round whose edges played such a variety of expressions; in the long, deep, narrow chin, whose point carried a thin gray tuft; in the tall forehead and high-arched head, sparsely covered with gray hairs carefully barbered; while across the forehead there ran delicate horizontal lines, which changed and quivered at the emotions of the spirit within. Young Barton did not require to study that face. He had known it from his infancy. It had a strange charm for him, though he had never been able to regard it with confidence or affection, though he could not but admire its force and even majesty, and though it was the countenance of his most noble and respectable godfather which now appeared so suddenly before him.

The earl, by a quick movement, parted the curtains and took a step forward. Like lightning his eye had taken in the figure of George Barton, who, thunder-struck, nevertheless by an instinctive movement made a bow and drew himself up.

Everything about this extraordinary peer, his perceptions, his thoughts, his judgments, his decisions, seemed to have the quickness and vivacity of lightning. In an instant his face passed through a marvelous variety of expressions—astonishment, anger, scorn; then it assumed a sudden gentleness and urbanity.

"You here, George Barton?" he said, modulating his voice, and making it almost paternal and caressing. "How are you? Have you come to give me some good news about your father?"

"I don't know, my lord, how you will consider it, whether good or bad," replied the young man, in a peculiar tone: "but"—he suddenly put his hand to his head, as if to retain his anguish, and his voice broke—"he—he is dead!"

"Dead?" cried the earl. "Are you sure of this? How do you know?"

"My lord—the unfortunate person who—was the cause of the accident to the Earl of Tilbury—the mysterious person who—"

"Stay!" interrupted the peer, putting his hand on the arm of the young man. "We will not talk here. Come with me into the library."

In this attitude, half familiarly he drew young Barton between the curtains. Suddenly he stopped, released the young man's arm, and put his head back into the hall for an instant.

"Simpson, I am engaged. Let no one disturb us in the library."

And he led the way, this time without approaching his visitor. Barton, who caught a side glance of his face, could see that it was agitated with conflicting emotions, and he nerved himself for a painful outbreak. He knew that it would be no holiday play to break a lance with one of the most redoubtable social and intellectual champions in England, a man who had sat at the Foreign Office, and held his own with Gortchakoff, with Bunsen and Cavour and Bismarck.

When they had entered the room, and Barton, coming second, had closed the door, the earl, who marched a few slow steps in the direction of the mantel-piece, with his head down and his hands in his pockets, suddenly wheeled round, and fixing the young man, with his gray eyes flashing, said, as if he would draw an avowal out of him by surprise and terror,

"Now, George Barton, may I ask you what the devil you want here?"

The young man's eye did not flinch for a moment from the eagle glance which was fixed upon him. On the contrary, his dark orbs, glowing with a more intense, if apparently more subdued flame than lighted up the earl's, seemed to search the face before him steadily, as if he were resolved to penetrate behind the mask and read the thoughts within. But that mask was inscrutable. He was, however, embarrassed, for he did not reply.

"Is your tongue tied?" cried the earl, impatiently.

"Forgive me, earl," said the young man, bowing with dignity, "but you are rather brusque, and it was only last night that I acquired the conviction that my father was the victim of the awful event in Regent Circus. I am hardly myself to-day."

The earl for a moment seemed startled and touched by the young man's statement, and the manner in which he delivered it, but the movement was immediately followed by an expression of sarcastic incredulity.

"George Barton dead, you say, and in so absurd a manner? I can not believe it! What does this mean? Is this a masquerade of mourning, and is it possible you are assisting in a comedy of deception? Your father's disappearance is one of the most extraordinary mysteries I ever heard of. He was to have met me in Portman Square on my return from Selby, on business of vital importance to

me. He never came. You came to me on Thursday night, and told me that cock-and-bull story about his engagement to dine with you at 'The Rainbow,' and his failure to put in an appearance. I set the detectives at work. Not a trace of him has been found. What can I suppose? I have not seen you since. What have you been doing? You seem to have been keeping very quiet. Now you suddenly turn up—wrapped in conventional gloom—and tell me that your father, as steady and unromantic a man as ever lived, has been destroyed, blown to pieces beyond all possibility of identification, in a sensational pyrotechnic flare-up in Regent's Circus! What does this mean, I say? Is this to throw me off the right scent? If so, I am only astounded at your simplicity. If you imagine that I am to be hoodwinked by such tactics you are hardly worthy of your character as my godson, on which you are unfortunately able to pique yourself."

The young man, though stung by the calculated severity and even brutality of this address, mastered his anger by a powerful effort, and fixed his attention on the earl's manner and expression as he delivered it. He was trying to penetrate the motive of this severity. Was it sincere or was it assumed? His face flushed deeply, but he replied in quiet, though tremulous tones, and with a dignity of manner that sensibly put the earl in the wrong:

"My lord, that was a distinction which was conferred upon me at a period when I had no discretion either to accept it or reject it; it was one emanating from your own good feeling and appreciation of my father, and which I had learned to regard as one of the signal honors of my life. I should be sorry if anything occurred to diminish the ardor with which I have sought to be worthy of it, or the pride with which I have cherished it. But I must observe that your lordship does a gross injustice to the person whom he selected for such a distinction when he imagines him capable, even to save a dearly-loved father from the consequences of his acts, of being knowingly a party to an attempt to deceive or defraud you."

The young man's voice, trembling at first under the violence of the emotions he was bravely struggling to suppress, grew firmer as he went on, and his last words were accompanied by a look and attitude that made a profound impression on the peer, whose nature was chivalric, if his passion or his egotism often got the better of it.

His manner softened as he replied, in gentler tones,

"Well, George, I did not intend to have spoken so harshly; but I am really utterly bewildered and upset by this business. I may be wrong—I will admit it for the moment, and recall my words. Let it pass. Sit down and tell me what is this horrible information you have brought me?"

"My lord, I tell you frankly, I did not come here to see you."

"Eh? You didn't come here to see me? Who the deuce did you come to see, then?" cried the peer, set off again by this inopportune avowal.

George Barton bit his lip, for the words were not out of his mouth before he saw that he had made a serious tactical mistake. He avoided a confession.

"Your lordship forgets," he said, "that, thanks to your kindness and the open and generous spirit of Lord Tilbury, I was on a foot-

ing of the closest intimacy with him. I did not think I was presuming too much in calling to ask after his condition under the dreadful circumstances which have happened."

"H'm! What! The morning after you have satisfied yourself that your father was dead? Eh? Is your mother aware of this?"

"No," said George Barton, hesitating and confused. "I have not deemed it right as yet to communicate what I have learned to her, though I know she is in a terrible state of anxiety."

"She has both written and telegraphed to me," said the earl; "and I replied as kindly and soothingly as I could."

"I thank you, my lord," said Barton, with warmth. "That is a kindness worthy of you! I was going to say I wish the proofs to be much more complete before I tell her the dreadful truth."

The earl shook his head with a solemn and dissatisfied air, and eyed the young man from under his half-closed eyelids more keenly and curiously than ever. Luckily for George Barton the peer's vivacity of thought led him at the moment to change the subject.

"By the way, will you tell me, Barton," he said, "what you were saying about me to one of the hall servants? You seemed to be casting French pearls before old Simpson, and if I heard aright —I could not help it; it was all I did hear, I assure you—you were connecting my name in a sarcastic manner with Spain—a country I detest."

"Forgive me, my lord; it was an indiscretion. I was really thinking aloud. Simpson had overheard you say something not very complimentary about my father to Sir Alfred Marks"—the earl delivered *sotto voce* an uncomplimentary expletive to Simpson's address—"in which I consider your lordship is mistaken. It was unfortunate you should have overheard it."

"Well, well," said the peer, who had been rapidly reflecting while the young man spoke, and had suddenly decided to adopt gentler tactics than he had hitherto employed, for he was inwardly painfully *intrigué* by the visit and the visitor's manner. "You are young, and no doubt this affair has upset you. We will say no more about that, but I will give you a bit of advice, as your godfather and an old man of the world, and it is this—never open your mind on any subject whatever to a menial. Never waste a thought by sending it down to the scullery with the broken meat, where it will be thrown to the dogs. Never make a confidant of a man below your own station in intelligence. Never give a servant a chance of picking your brains or guessing your secrets, and never allow a servant to tell you the secrets of others. For every unit you may chance to gain in the course of a life-time by disregarding these maxims of an old cynic, you will lose a hundred units in dignity, in self-esteem, and in your control over the conditions of your own life and happiness. *Crede experto.* And now tell me what have you learned? What is it you wish me to believe about your father and this horrible mystery in the Circus?"

"I really and sincerely do not wish you to accept anything from me, my lord, in regard to the subject. It was the chief of the Detective Department who last night gave me reasons—which, alas! I feel to be only too well founded—for believing that my father has been

made the victim of one of the foulest and most horrible murders that ever was committed."

The earl started, and cast a piercing look at the young man. His eyes expressed a sudden trouble and horror, of which his observer took note.

"Murders!" he said, with a peculiar, long-drawn intonation. 'A murder, Barton, in Regent Circus, in daylight, and in such strange circumstances! You are half out of your mind. I don't wonder at it; and the detective is a dreamer and an ass! Depend upon it, whoever the man was who was blown to atoms on Thursday last in the Circus, it was a case of suicide. Had your father, do you know or suspect, any motive for committing suicide?"

As he put this question, the earl leaned forward and keenly scrutinized the young man's face.

George Barton's eye did not blench; it was full of a strange and startled light. A slight shudder had passed through his frame, and he drew a long breath, for the words, the movements, the emotion of the peer had sent a sudden and awful conviction through his soul! Why had the earl started at the word "murder"? Why should he argue for suicide? However, he must command himself. He replied to the peer's last question,

"None, my lord. I am as satisfied of that as of my own existence. No one knows that better than your lordship. He was up in London on your business—he was here to discharge a grave and painful duty—on your behalf—not his own—and no man that ever lived was less likely than my loved and honored father to have shrunk from his responsibilities, or to have sought by a cowardly suicide to evade them."

A flush touched, with a fleeting color, the earl's pale cheek; his eyes seemed to change from gray to green as George Barton's voice rose to loudness and vehemence.

"Not so loud, I pray you!" he said. "You know I am not deaf. But tell me, please, what are those proofs of which you speak, which the sagacious Sontag has so mysteriously unearthed."

"Ten minutes before the catastrophe my father was in a shop in Regent Street, where he had called for a watch which he—which he destined for me." He paused from emotion. "He went up Regent Street. At the time he had on him a watch which you remember well, for you gave it to him." The earl nodded, and his face showed an intense interest. "It was one of Frodsham's. A piece of the face of that watch has been found. It was found in a position which leaves no shadow of doubt that it came from a watch which was on the victim at the time of the explosion. Again, I have examined the hand which is at Scotland Yard. I am prepared to swear it is my father's hand. He had a slight deformity in the little finger."

"My dear George," said the earl, "I knew him for over twenty-five years, and this is the first time I ever heard of it."

"It was scarcely noticeable unless special attention had been called to it. See, my lord, do you observe anything unusual in my right hand, as I hold it and move it—so? No. But I straighten all my fingers. Now you observe that the last little finger-joint re-

mains at an angle to the plane of my palm. I inherit that peculiarity from my father."

"Humph! I confess I don't see very much in that."

"The hand was my father's, my lord," said the young man, with emphasis.

"But, George," said the peer, "don't allow feeling and suspicion to betray your judgment, which is usually logical and excellent. This is a dream, a fancy, a folly, an utter impossibility. Do not be carried away by that idiot in Scotland Yard. They are bound to get up some theory. Your father is no more dead than I am."

"I would rather he were dead, my lord, than that your theory were correct. George Barton, my father, has never run away from you, or with any papers of yours, either to Spain or elsewhere. You know, from the circumstances, and from the nature of the documents, that he had no interest whatever in making away with them. There is some fearful mystery here, which, I venture to suggest to your lordship, it concerns you deeply to assist me to solve; for your own honor, and that of the family under whose roof we are at this moment, are deeply involved in its solution."

At these words, whether from anger or from some other cause, the paleness of the earl's face seemed to intensify. There was something in what Barton had said which startled and annoyed him keenly. He could scarcely control himself, as the young man, who kept his dark eyes fixed upon him, plainly saw; but the peer's self-command was tremendous. He spoke calmly and in a steady voice, and his lips were curved in a sarcastic smile.

"The honor of my family and that of the Earl of Tilbury," he said, "will probably survive the *dénouement* of any domestic tragedy in that of my agent. Your father would have had more sense than to make such an observation to me; but I forgive you; you are young and inexperienced, and perhaps we have spoiled you a little. I should like you to understand that the privileges of a godson do not extend to the use of any license or presumption to his godfather, especially when he is a peer of the realm. In any case, may I be permitted to ask you—for I confess the rather stilted attitude you have been pleased to assume toward me during this interview surprises, fatigues, and somewhat bores me—will you, I say, allow me to ask you how you happen to know that such important interests as you allude to are at stake? Perhaps you have the missing papers!"

"No, my lord. I can not say positively where they are, though I know where they ought to be. My father handed them over to Pollard & Pollard."

"What!" shouted the earl, while an odd gleam of light flashed across his face, "your father handed them to Pollard & Pollard? How can you possibly have come to know that?"

"I have seen their receipt, my lord, specifying the papers and the date of delivery. It was the 23d of June."

"You have seen a receipt?"

"Yes, in the Temple. My father, as you are aware, when he was up in London, gave me the pleasure of sharing his quarters."

"But, of course," said the earl, concealing his anxiety, "your father did not confide his business—or rather my business—to you?"

"Pardon me, my lord, I have no hesitation in answering the question frankly. For the past two years there have been no secrets between my father and me. He discussed all his business confidentially with me, which is to say, all your business. It may have been an indiscretion, but I would fain hope it was not a dishonorable one. You will remember, your lordship encouraged us to hope that I might succeed my father in the position of your agent. He sought to initiate me into the business of the post which it was his ambition, though I confess it was not altogether mine, that I should fill."

"Do you mean to tell me," said the earl, excitedly, "that your father confided to you the details of my secret personal and family affairs? If you really suppose your father to be deceased, are you willing, for some object of your own, to blacken his memory to his employer, as a trustworthy and discreet man of business? I never should have believed this of George Barton had I not heard it from his son!"

The peer had begun to move nervously about the room, for this information had evidently troubled him, but suddenly recollecting himself, he sat down with a forced air of indifference.

"My lord," said young Barton, "I am sorry if you feel inclined to blame my poor father for placing too much confidence in his son. His conduct is, perhaps, open to criticism. But he felt that he could trust his confidant (as I humbly venture to assure you he could implicitly), and he really of late seemed to feel the need of some second person to lean on and advise with, so great were his anxieties, and so overwhelming the responsibilities of his position. You must remember that he was, unfortunately, placed in a situation in which he became, in a sense, the trustee, or depositary of other interests than yours—a situation created by yourself, in which it was impossible for him, as a man of honor, to look only to his duty to you as his employer. You know that he was a man who, in all he did, constantly bore in mind the uncertainties of life, and was always trying to take precautions to prevent them from injuring any of the interests confided to his care. This peculiarity, many who had business transactions with him thought he carried to excess. The business you speak of was the most troublesome, disagreeable, and important of his life. It weighed upon his mind and depressed his spirits. He deemed it a special duty in that case to take special precautions—for he had lost all confidence in Pollard & Pollard—that, in the event of any sudden calamity—though he could not possibly have foreseen anything so dreadful as that which has actually occurred—some one should be in a position to see that no one's interest should suffer by his death, especially those of his friend and mine, Lord Tilbury, or those of the countess, who has always treated my father and his family with such kindness and consideration."

The earl had not lost a word, though he seemed to be looking over and beyond the young man into some far distance, while the latter was speaking. He started, as if from a reverie, when George Barton had finished, but he remained still wrapped in thought, with his hands crossed behind his head. He seemed to be pursuing some train of thought which had suddenly been suggested to him, to be

revolving some unsettled plan, for once or twice he opened his lips to speak, and quickly shut them again. Then, taking down his hands, he spoke quietly, and with an appearance, at least, of cordiality.

"George," he said, "what you have just told me comes upon me as a surprise. I was not aware that there was another creature living, except your father, the solicitors, and myself, who knew anything of the exceedingly grave affairs to which you allude. If he has, indeed, confided all the particulars to you, you must know what I mean by qualifying them in those terms." George Barton bowed. "Well, it may be for the best after all. For the moment I am unable to judge. You are young and inexperienced. I must reflect. I must seek for further information. I am in the hands of Pollard & Pollard."

"Unhappily, my lord!"

The words suddenly escaped from the young man's lips before he had taken time to think.

The earl threw a glance of irritation at him, which, however, he immediately suppressed, and resuming his calmness of look and speech, went on:

"Well, you can understand the delicacy of my position. Your father was arranging to relieve me from it, at a great sacrifice to me which I was anxious and willing to make. The means of doing it were in his hands. They have disappeared with him—unless," said the earl, his face suddenly lightening—"unless the papers are at your chambers."

"They are not, my lord," said George Barton, with decision. "I have already told you that they are at Pollard & Pollard's."

"Humph!" said the earl, thinking aloud. "The mystery thickens. You are certain you have seen the receipt?"

"Absolutely certain, my lord. A sort of copy of it is in a place of security known only to me. I had it in my hands this morning. My father had the original on him on Thursday when he left the Temple to meet you."

The earl's mind was evidently working at some hidden problem, for he had spoken, and continued to speak, absently and mechanically.

"You are certain you have it? Humph! well, that requires explanation. I am more puzzled than ever. It is like a maze—one finds an *impasse* at every turn. What could he gain by disappearing? He could do nothing with the bonds. Pollards say his accounts must be in disorder."

"They lie, my lord," said George Barton.

The earl bridled at this rude interruption.

"Strong words are a mistake, George, except on very rare occasions."

"This is one, my lord. Forgive me, but I can not hear a word, from any one whatever, which either directly or remotely attacks my father's honor."

"Well—I can not blame you—I must take time to think this over. Gracious heavens! Where is your father? Why has he disappeared? All this has profoundly troubled, harried, upset me. We can do no good by talking further at this moment. If you have any

regard for me, for my family, in which you have always been treated as a friend—if you have any regard for your father's memory—you will do nothing hastily."

The earl once more keenly and anxiously scrutinized the young man's face, as if he would pierce to the very center of his brain. He had not forgotten George Barton's admission that his object in coming to Grosvenor Place was not to see him. He had the suspiciousness of a man who had a grave secret to conceal—over whose head hung a sword of Damocles.

"You will do your best, let me hope, to assist us in clearing up this business. In your father I have lost, at a critical moment, a wise and devoted counselor. He only could understand and appreciate the difficulties of my position, and do justice to my intentions. To you, I can only say that, if your father's memory is cleared, as I trust it may be, and you will behave with discretion, I shall know how to prove the sincerity of my obligation to you."

The earl uttered these last words with grace and feeling. A strange light glowed in the dark eyes of the young man. Some grave predetermination was struggling with some flash of comfort or pleasure, which the words he had just heard had sent through his being. He took the earl's offered hand and pressed it. He did not venture to speak. The peer did not detain him, observing that he was under the influence of secret emotion. He simply rang the bell for the footman, and turned to the table which was covered with papers. He also was troubled and preoccupied.

George Barton, seeing that it was useless for the present to press for an interview with the Countess of Tilbury, and perhaps not now so anxious to precipitate matters as he had been, quietly accepted his dismissal, and left the house, so buried in reflection as hardly to be conscious what he was doing.

"Simpson," said the earl, entering the hall a few minutes after the door had closed on his involuntary visitor, and buttoning his gloves, while the footman stood attentive with the peer's hat and stick, "whom did Mr. George Barton ask to see?"

"The countess, your lordship."

"Well, if he should call again, and I am here, I will see him. If I should not be here, you can say that her ladyship is engaged."

"Yes, your lordship." The earl went out.

"What do you think of that, Mr. Perkins?" said Simpson to the footman, after he had placed a couple of inches of oak between himself and the peer. "We ain't my Lord Selby's gentlemen, and neither the countess nor the young earl would be pleased to know he were a-interfering with their visitors, be they great or little ones."

"'Xactly," said Mr. Perkins, "but he does what he likes, does the earl, and what he likes is to have his own way. If I was you, Mr. Simpson, I would just mention it to Mrs. Collops, her ladyship's lady-in-waiting, and take her advice about it, before I carried out such orders as them. He's foxy, the old earl, you know, and the young lord was always very free with that young Mr. Barton."

"Ay!" returned Mr. Simpson. "And old Mr. Barton is dead! I

guess from what Mr. George said he is the very man that assfixiated himself in Regent Circus the other day."

"W—w—what!"

"Yes. And there's something very mysterious about all this. I'll advise with Mrs. Collops, as you suggest. Her ladyship likes to have her own way, too, and no interferience Do you think, Mr. Perkins, that you could manage to look to the door for a few minutes, while I run down-stairs and take a little snack? Cards and inquiries will be beginning in a half an hour."

"Certingly, Mr. Simpson—always most willing to oblige a gentleman."

CHAPTER IV.

A CASE VERY IMPERFECTLY STATED.

MR. SONTAG had not permitted any hint to slip into the newspapers of his suspicions concerning the identity of the individual who had perished in Regent Circus, and he rather encouraged light rumor, the sweet Delilah of the gay reporter, to have her way. He intended to pursue his inquiries in an indirect and underground manner. Were his conjectures accurate, he was sure that he would not be able, by any direct inquiries, to worm out the particulars of a conspiracy involving people of the highest position and resources, people who had evidently been able to command the assistance of the most daring and scientific criminals. In such a case he must expect to be countermined, to have a thousand ingenious obstacles sprung in his way, even perhaps to be betrayed and sold by some of his subordinates. He was anxious, in order to lay a firm basis for his case, to ascertain, without giving any hint of his suspicions, what were the exact relations of Mr. Barton with the Selby family, and what the circumstances which had preceded his disappearance. The persons who had killed Mr. Barton had evidently counted upon a destruction so complete as to leave no trace of his identity; and so paramount was this object that they did not shrink, in order to secure it, from imperiling the lives of other people. Hence he concluded they were desperate people in a desperate situation. But what was the situation which was so desperate that it prompted some person or persons to resort to such a horrible species of crime, in order to rid themselves of the business agent of a peer?

Young Barton had gone to the Detective Department at the first suspicion of foul play, and his ability and sincerity had favorably impressed Mr. Sontag, who felt obliged, after George had recognized his father's hand, to communicate to him the striking circumstances relating to the watch. Mr. Sontag, however, was puzzled to find that young Barton, though hinting at strange and terrible suspicions, preserved an obstinate silence with regard to the business which had brought his father to London, or to his relations at that time with the Earl of Selby. Mr. Sontag did not press him. He hoped to get at the facts in time. He had not the least idea of worrying Lord Selby, or his solicitors. He took the instructions of Messrs. Pollard & Pollard to spare no effort in endeavoring to discover the whereabouts, dead or alive, of Mr. Barton. He asked

those gentlemen no questions, accepting any statements they made without pressing for explanations. What those statements were will appear hereafter.

In the newspapers of Monday, the day on which young Barton had made his visit in Grosvenor Place, the following advertisement had appeared:

"£100 REWARD will be given for information of the whereabouts of George Barton, Solicitor, of Manor Calham, Dibdale, Yorks. And £500—FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS—for the recovery of a number of documents, last in the possession of the said George Barton, consisting of deeds of title, bonds, and other papers, of a confidential character, and of great value, a list of which may be seen by any person who can prove to the satisfaction of the undersigned that he is likely to be able to give any information of their whereabouts, or that of the said George Barton, by

"POLLARD & POLLARD,

"Solicitors to the Rt. Hon the Earl of Selby, K.G., 155 Lincoln's Inn Fields."

When Mr. Sontag read this advertisement, which was inserted without consulting him, he simply cut it out and stuck it in a new memorandum book, which was marked—"G. B."

Young Barton, his faculties concentrated on one object, had not looked that morning into the advertisement columns of the newspapers, though he had perused with care the latest meager details worked up by the reporters, of "The Regent Circus Mystery," as, by common consent, the tragedy was called. Returning to his chambers in King's Bench Walk after his interview with the Earl of Selby, he was surprised to meet on his staircase an old barrister, more renowned for his legal knowledge and acumen than for the extent of his practice, in whose chambers he had read the year previously. Mr. Le Breton was one of the elder Barton's oldest and most valued friends.

The young man's face as he mounted the staircase was clouded with thought and anxiety. Since his interview with the earl a vast depression had settled down upon his spirit. He was so wrapped up in his reflections that he would have passed the barrister unnoticed, had not the latter, touching him gently on the arm, said,

"Barton, are you going to cut me? Why, what does all this mean?"

"You, Mr. Le Breton!" said George, his face lighting up for a moment with a sad smile, as he grasped the other's hand, with the sudden energy of a man in the act of falling, who lays hold of the nearest support.

"Yes," replied the barrister, slipping his hand through Barton's arm, and turning to accompany him. "I have been up to see you. What is all this about? What on earth is the matter?"

"Stay," said George Barton, gulping down his emotion, "let us get into my room."

He could scarcely stand. The elder man supported him until he reached his room, and fell, rather than threw himself, on a chair.

The barrister took a seat, and waited for his friend to recover from

his emotion. Barton had hid his face in his hands and the tears ran freely through his fingers. The other, from delicacy, appeared not to notice. He rose, and filling with a trembling hand a pipe which lay on the mantel-piece, and lighting it with deliberation, gave the young man time to master his feelings. Under Le Breton's arm there was pressed tightly a morning journal. He moved quietly about the chamber, puffing out tremendous volumes of smoke, looked at the books, looked out of window, examined the carpet, in fact looked everywhere that he possibly could without seeming to remark his young friend. It was thoroughly English sympathy and reserve, deep and hot as a sleeping volcano, the top of which is covered with snow.

Five minutes thus passed in a silence which was as manly as it was affecting.

At length George Barton, wiping the tears from his eyes, and making a violent effort to master his grief, looked up. His face, ordinarily of a healthy brown tint, had turned of a yellow and sickly pallor, his eyes were weary and destitute of their usual fire; he seemed to have aged ten years in a few days.

"Forgive me, Le Breton," he said, in a trembling voice, "for not sparing you the pain of witnessing such emotion. I could not help it. I am suffering deeply."

"My dear fellow, don't mind me! I'm an old friend. I guessed, you know, there was something serious—that was why I came. I saw this, you know." He took the paper from under his arm.

George started. How could Le Breton know of any connection between the mystery of Regent Circus and George Barton? The disappearance of the latter had not yet been made public, so far as he knew.

"What do you mean, Le Breton?"

"Why, you know, of course—this advertisement—your father."

Young Barton suddenly recovering his vigor, jumped up and snatched the newspaper from the other's hand. The old lawyer, with the instinct of his profession, had marked, in solid lines of ink, a small oblong space in the "agony column." Barton's eyes had taken possession of its contents at a glance. His eyes shot flame.

"How cruel! how dastardly!" he said, dashing the paper on the ground. "And he must have known it all the time he was talking to me."

He looked at Le Breton with such a dangerous light in his eyes that the latter drew back instinctively. George noticed the movement, and stretched out his hand.

"Forgive me, Le Breton. It is enough to drive a man mad. I need all my self-control, and I am, as well, much in want of advice and sympathy. Some good genius has sent you here. Sit down and let us talk. First, let me sport my oak. We must not be interrupted."

He proceeded to shut his outer door, and when he returned to the room his manner was calm and decided.

"Le Breton," he said, as he took a seat at the table, and rested his elbows on it, "you are the first who has called my attention to this advertisement, and nevertheless, an hour ago, I was closeted with Lord Selby!"

"What does it mean?"

Le Breton's pipe had gone out, but he kept sucking at it like a sugar-stick.

"It means one of the most infernal plots that was ever hatched to ruin the reputation of one of the purest and most honorable men that ever lived."

"*Integer vitæ scelerisque purus,*" murmured the old barrister, with the pipe between his teeth. "I never knew another who answered so well to the description as George Barton."

"Thank you," said George Barton, rising and taking the barrister's hand and pressing it warmly. "Your words act on me like a cordial."

He resumed his seat. His calmness of manner and steadiness of voice were now phenomenal.

"Le Breton—he is dead!"

The barrister started. For the first time he noticed that young Barton was in mourning.

"Dead!" continued Barton. "And he did not die a natural death—a horrible and unheard of crime has taken him away. Le Breton, can you believe it? It was my father who was killed in Regent Circus."

The horror and pain which appeared in Le Breton's face were indescribable. He attempted to babble out a few words, but his voice died upon his lips. The pipe dropped out of his hands upon the floor.

"You will help me," continued George Barton, after a pause, "to judge whether I am dreaming or demented, or whether I have any intelligence remaining to me. Listen to my statement of all the facts I am yet in possession of, with all that incredulity which you used to teach me was the proper attitude of counsel in approaching the consideration of a case submitted for his opinion, and then tell me your own inferences. But first I must say that behind the facts known to the police, and which I am going to relate to you, there is a series of facts not bearing directly on the question of identity, but pointing clearly to motives for a crime, of which I can not inform you. I have my suspicions that they have a sinister bearing on the fate of my father. I can not help thinking they must have; though, if it be so, they compromise persons of the highest position and involve consequences which I shudder to contemplate. Indeed, I dare not permit myself to contemplate them, they seem so incredible, so impossible. Secrets of a great and powerful family are involved—secrets which came into my possession under the seal of the most sacred confidence, and which nothing but the last extremity would justify me in revealing to any living soul outside that family, to whom I am bound by honor and sympathy and gratitude—and—affection." His voice trembled as he pronounced the last word, and he hid his face in his hands. "The advertisement," he continued, "to which you have drawn my attention of course discloses that something more is concerned in my father's disappearance than his own interests or good name. So far I have a right to use it. It is a disclosure voluntarily made by those concerned. But of the nature and bearing of the documents which are therein said to have disappeared along with my father I am not free to give you

any clew or information. Please bear that in mind, and do not ask me for any explanations in that direction."

"It seems to me, my dear Barton," said the old barrister, resuming his accustomed dry, legal manner and attitude, "that I am asked to advise on a case of which only the least material facts are to be submitted to me. True, that it is generally the fate of our profession—for, either from looseness of intellect or carelessness or *malice prepense*, the attorneys rarely tell us the whole truth when they present a case for our opinion. It is very easy for an ingenious attorney who wants to make business to conceal some important facts, and so to get an opinion which justifies him in plunging a client into a lawsuit; and when the poor client has lost his case, it is hardly possible to discover where the responsibility lies—it is, I expect, generally thrown on the unfortunate counsel. You are very frank, and you will not hold me responsible for any opinion given on an imperfect case stated. However, let me see what I can make out of the fragments you are going to submit to me."

Barton then, in brief, trenchant style, laid before the barrister all the circumstantial evidence relating to the identity of the person who had perished in Regent Circus, with which the reader is already acquainted, first stating that his father had come up to London with regard to a matter of business of the most vital interest to Lord Selby and his sister, the Countess of Tilbury: that he had had in his possession papers which were so valuable and important as to have given him great anxiety so long as he was responsible for them; that these papers had been handed over to Pollard & Pollard, who had given a receipt for the same, which he, George Barton, had seen in his father's possession on the morning of the day he disappeared; and a list of the documents mentioned in the receipt, which he had himself drawn up and compared with the original receipt, and which list had been initialed by his father, was now lying there in the private desk of him, George Barton, junior, but could not at present be shown to his friend, because the papers were therein particularized.

"But stay," interrupted the lawyer, "Pollard & Pollard themselves offer in this advertisement to give the particulars of the lost documents!"

"So they do," replied George, struck by the perspicacity of the old lawyer. "I had forgotten that. Well, then, I suppose there can be no harm in showing it to you. I will do so directly."

"Where is the original receipt?" inquired Le Breton.

"It was in my poor father's pocket-book—it disappeared with him."

He then went on to relate that a very violent scene had taken place on the afternoon of Wednesday, the 25th, between his father and Pollard & Pollard, who had wished him to agree to a certain line of action which he deemed to be dishonorable; that, on his return from the interview, he was much excited, and expressed himself with regard to those "gentlemen"—it is a saying in the profession that "every solicitor is a gentleman by Act of Parliament," the only possible power which could have established such a paradox—in stronger terms of suspicion and disgust than young George Barton ever remembered to have heard his father use of any human being; that

the next morning they had breakfasted together in his chambers at the Temple, after which George went to read in the library, leaving his father writing; that the elder Barton had received a letter from the Earl of Selby, who had been absent for three or four days in the country, stating that he would arrive at St. Pancras Station at four o'clock, and requesting Mr. Barton to meet him at the family mansion in Portman Square, at five that afternoon; that he had agreed to return to the Temple after the interview, and to dine with his son at 'The Rainbow' at seven o'clock.

"I left him sitting there, writing," said young Barton, with emotion. "He smiled at me as I went out, and said, 'We'll circumvent those rascals yet if the earl only holds true and has courage.' I never saw him again. You know, as I am not yet called, I keep no clerk. The laundress left at half-past ten, and he was here then. The next trace we have of him is his calling at Lund, the watchmaker's, in Regent Street. He intended to give me the watch he used to carry before the Earl of Selby presented him with a magnificent chronometer watch, made by Frodsham."

Young Barton then related the other facts which he had learned from Mr. Sontag.

The old lawyer had listened with close attention to this history, and spite of his sympathy with his young friend, whose genuine affection for his father could not fail to excite emotion, even in one whose enthusiasm and faith in mankind had long since gone out in ashes, or now only glowed in faint embers, he could not repress the suspicion of incredulity which too long an experience of the world and of human nature had made habitual to him. It was impossible for him to believe that George Barton was the individual who had met his death in Regent Circus. It was inconceivable to the old friend who knew George Barton so well that he, staid, timid about fire-arms, and by no means given to curious inquiries or experiments, should be carrying about explosives, especially in the crowded streets of the metropolis. Even should his anxieties have turned his brain toward suicide, that was certainly not the method of self-destruction he would have chosen. It was supposable that the man in Regent Circus might have been contemplating suicide, and that he had furnished himself with nitro-glycerine for the purpose, and that it had gone off prematurely—but George Barton was not that man.

Moreover, he was one who, even in suicide, would have thought of others. He would have spared others any pain or danger in destroying himself. He would, if anything, have taken a poison. Thus Le Breton argued to himself. Well, how could such a man get charged with dynamite or nitro-glycerine without knowing it? Had some malicious person slipped a cartridge into his pocket in the street? The idea seemed too absurd to be worth discussion. Such a person ran the risk of being himself blown up, of being seen, of being caught. Le Breton did not say to his young friend, but he thought, that the latter's confidence in his father's integrity, and his anxiety to prove it, led him to accept too readily the very imperfect evidence which was in possession of the police as substantiating his theory. The hand, he admitted, was a very strong point, but after all it was so easy to be deceived by a hand, especially after death.

The little finger was a coincidence interesting but conclusive. Again, Mr. Sontag's watch theory was ingenious, but trivial. Frodsham's watches, product of more than a century of manufacture, were not numbered by hundreds, but by scores of thousands. If the worthy Yorkshireman had also caught a piece of the Swiss watch as well on his clothes, that would have been much more conclusive.

Le Breton felt what pain it would cause the young man to combat the strange persuasion that his father had met his death in the manner suggested, but he was too honest to conceal his opinion.

"Without more conclusive proof," he said, "I think we must abandon your theory of your father's death. I think you have accepted it too hastily."

"Then you believe that he has run away?" cried George, in a tone of anguish. "Is that consistent with your *integer vitæ scelerisque purus?*"

"It does not follow, my dear Barton, that your father is not dead —has not been made away with. It is that which I wish to impress upon you. While you are pursuing this chimera, you may be losing important traces elsewhere."

"No," said George Barton; "I have so firm a persuasion that I am right, that I do not feel it worth while to follow up any other line of inquiry. Le Breton, you will think me very foolish and visionary, but from the very moment that my anxiety began with the non-appearance of my father on Thursday night—so soon as I had ascertained at Lord Selby's, which I did at eleven o'clock from the earl himself, who professed to be greatly put out, my father's failure to keep his appointment—I had a suspicion of foul play. I drove immediately to Scotland Yard, I visited every place where I could fancy he had gone. I went to the hospitals to satisfy myself he had not been the victim of an accident or of sudden illness. The earl had been to Lord Tilbury's. He was the first to tell me of that terrible business in the Circus. Somehow the conviction flashed across me there that it was my father who had perished under Lord Tilbury's eyes—an incident which, if you only knew all the facts, would appear to you to increase the improbability of my theory, so inconceivably strange and dramatic does the coincidence appear. The young earl, as you know, has never recovered consciousness. He knew my father well. He alone possibly could clear up the mystery—he may have caught a glimpse of him—but there is little hope of his recovery. Since that time I have hardly slept a wink. I have thought of nothing else; my conviction has grown stronger the more I review the circumstances. That conviction I can not shake off. The interest that certain persons had in destroying the undoubted proofs of their criminality which were in my father's possession—an immense sum of money which was involved—" He stopped suddenly. He was forgetting the caution he had imposed upon himself.

The old barrister caught at this hint, but he saw that George did not wish to compromise some important personages, whom he naturally guessed to be either the Selbys or the Tilburys. He said,

"By the way, did you make any inquiries at Pollard & Pollard's?"

"Yes. The partners said that in the circumstances they did not

consider that they would be justified in granting me an interview They instructed a clerk to tell me that they had placed the matter in the hands of the police, and that I must communicate with Scotland Yard."

"Oh, well, that was natural, was it not? Have you any objection to tell me what position they occupy in these serious affairs of which you speak?"

"That is my difficulty. I can hardly answer that question without compromising others. However, I will say that their position and character are gravely imperiled; they are so mixed up in the dangerous situation of which my father held the key that it is impossible to conceive them separated from the persons concerned."

"Take care, George Barton. Pollard & Pollard is one of the most respectable firms in the profession—the very top of the tree—immensely strong, with untarnished reputation, and the partners are considered to be two of the very ablest and shrewdest men of business in the law-list. They are enormously rich, and beyond any suspicion, and yet, if I understand you, your theory—I must call it so—is based on a criminal imputation against this firm."

Barton for a few moments remained silent and undecided.

"Le Breton," he said, "I can say it to you, though you will probably think that trouble has disordered my brain. I answer your supposition in the affirmative—'It is.' I told you what my father thought and said after the stormy interview on Tuesday afternoon. I know the facts, and I agree with him. I wish it were only Pollard & Pollard whose position and interests were in danger, or against whom my suspicions were directed! I would not hesitate for a moment to declare those suspicions to the police."

"Hum!" said Le Breton, a particle which has not a particle of meaning, but an ejaculation, nevertheless, which may conceal a world of thoughts and ideas. He reflected silently for a few minutes. He had a real affection for the Barton family, a profound sympathy with his young friend, and a sincere desire to help him; but there was a mystery in all that he had heard which defied his ingenuity. Besides, it is not a lawyer's business to imagine, his habit is to reason from facts, and the facts disclosed seemed to the barrister to prove that George Barton was laboring under a hallucination; that his usually clear, penetrating intellect had had its vision distorted by recent events: a result which was not surprising.

"By the way," he said, "you promised to show me a copy of that list of papers."

"Ah! yes."

Young Barton unlocked his desk, and took from a private drawer a sheet of paper in folio, on which was engrossed in his own hand, a copy of the list referred to, which was initialed at the bottom "G. B.," under the letters "Exd."

The barrister perused it with great deliberation.

"Humph!" he said, opening his eyes wide, and fixing them keenly on George Barton, "what does this mean?" He read:

"'Brief of Title to the Estates, lands, tenements'—hum, hum—'known and described as Linton Grange and Linton Park, in the County of Somerset, the property of the Rt. Honorable Isidora Maria Nevilton, Countess of Tilbury,' et cetera, et cetera. 'Deed of

mortgage and charge of life interest in the same from the same to the Rt. Honorable Edward Charles Eversly Layton'—hum, hum—'Earl of Selby, K.G.,' et cetera—hum—'a first charge of £50,000'—hum—'266 Bonds of one thousand dollars each, July coupon attached, of the Four per cent. Funded Loan of the United States of America, numbered'—hum, hum—the deuce!

"Why," continued the old barrister, "this is—monumental! Do you aver seriously these were all delivered to Pollard & Pollard?"

"I tell you I saw the receipt."

"When?"

"My father had it in his hand on Thursday morning."

"Did he go to Pollards' after you saw him?"

"I can not say. Knowing on what terms he had left them on Wednesday afternoon, and what he intended to do on Thursday afternoon, I should say it was impossible that he could have called upon them on Thursday morning."

"And yet they advertise, apparently, for these identical papers?"

"Precisely."

"Were no other documents in question?"

"None."

"Had they any interest in suppressing any of these documents? I don't see how they could have; the character of the documents sufficiently indicates that—a brief of title, mortgage, some bonds to bearer. Surely no one would suppress or run away with such documents as those. I am more mystified than ever."

George Barton said nothing. The barrister reflected with a puzzled face. At length he said,

"When did the young Earl of Tilbury come of age?"

"In February of this year."

"Have the accounts of the executor or executors of the estate been settled and discharged?"

"The settlement is not yet completed. Lord Tilbury has absolute confidence in Lord Selby, the sole executor. Lord Selby, overwhelmed by his own engagements, intrusted the entire administration to Pollard & Pollard. The estate was over a million and three quarters, and of course the accounts for eight years are long and complicated. Lord Tilbury had great confidence in my father. He proposed that, as my father had had nothing to do with the administration, he should go through the accounts with the Pollards, and wind them up."

"Ha! and there was a disagreement?" said Le Breton.

"Well, they did not agree."

"And upon this," cried the barrister, turning upon young Barton and eying him keenly, "you base a theory of foul play on the part of such a firm as Pollard & Pollard?"

"I haven't said that."

"You imply it."

"I don't even imply it. I tell you there are other circumstances, which all your ingenuity would not enable you to guess at, which made my father dangerous to certain parties."

Le Breton did not push the matter further in this direction. He continued to study the list before him as if he were endeavoring to extract some inspiration from the bald statements it contained.

Suddenly he struck his forehead with his palm.

"Barton," he said, "I recall something vaguely which made some noise at the time. Did not the old Earl of Selby disinherit the present one?"

"Well, as far as he could. The family estates were settled, but there was a large personalty, and the estate of Linton, which he had purchased in his life-time. The present earl married a French countess, with whom his father had fallen in love long after his first wife's death. She was a woman of great beauty, talent, and virtues. She preferred the son to the father; and notwithstanding all the efforts of her family, she married the present earl. The old earl never forgave her or his son either."

"Egad," remarked Le Breton, parenthetically—he was a bachelor—"I never could understand how men could make such fools of themselves about women. One woman is as good as another."

"Ah!" replied George Barton, "there are mortals so weak as not to share your opinion. Certainly the old earl did not. He never married again, and never afterward appeared in England. He lived on the continent, between Paris, Homburg, and Cannes. He was very fond of his only daughter, the Countess of Tilbury. The Earl of Tilbury, father of the present earl, was also a favorite of his; he had a good deal to do with the marriage. The Countess of Tilbury always remained on good terms with her brother, in spite of the rupture with his father, and she was also exceedingly intimate with his wife. I remember Lady Selby well. Her daughter, Lady Blanche Layton, who has come out this season, resembles her."

Had the old barrister been looking at George Barton's face at this moment, he would have observed that his eyes brightened and a slight flush colored his cheek underneath the brown.

"Lady Selby died six years ago, leaving several children, the eldest Lord Layton, who has made such a mess of it on the turf. The earl has paid an infinite sum of money on his account. It was one of my father's greatest anxieties to find this money. The earl's own expenditure is not measured, and vast as the Selby estates are, the drafts upon his resources have been seriously burdensome."

"And yet Lord Selby has been able to lend the Countess of Tilbury fifty thousand pounds!"

"I can not tell you anything about that."

"At all events, the old Earl of Selby left Linton to Lady Tilbury."

"For life only, with remainder to her son. He also left her nearly two hundred thousand pounds in personalty—shares, consols, French rentes, *et cetera*—but she was requested only to take the enjoyment of the dividends. He requested her to hold the principal intact for the benefit of her son; and there was one peculiar thing about it—he made her sole executor."

"So that, in fact, she has absolute power of disposition?"

"Yes; and she is a woman who is worthy of the confidence her father reposed in her. My father said so, and I regard his judgment as infallible. He knew her well. She always treated him with friendship, and sometimes consulted him. This has added lately to the anxiety of his position."

"According to this there appears to have been some great irregu-

larity. Lord Selby was the executor of the estate to which the young Earl of Tilbury succeeded from his father. Young Tilbury, on the other hand, was the remainder-man to the Linton Grange property, which the countess, his mother, has charged to the Earl of Selby."

"For the purpose of covering advances stated in the deed to have been made by Lord Selby to the Tilbury estates, to pay off a charge which fell due on part of those estates."

"Even then the countess could only charge her own life interest."

"Precisely, and it is a very imperfect security. Still, Linton Grange brings in £12,000 a year. In addition to this the countess deposited those United States bonds, and paid a large sum in cash, for which she has no security but the earl's engagement. It was a family arrangement, promoted by Pollard & Pollard, ostensibly to protect a portion of the Tilbury estates."

"Are the Tilbury estates valuable?"

"Over a million, and a large personalty, three-quarters of a million more."

"And yet you say Lord Selby has had to make a large advance to the estate out of his own resources?"

"You see what the paper you hold in your hand says."

"I see what the paper says," said the old barrister, testily, "but neither I nor any one else can make anything out of it. The situation seems to be an utterly unimaginable one."

"Precisely; and if I were to tell you the real facts you would hardly believe them."

"You hint that Pollard & Pollard were interested in keeping these transactions secret, and yet they seem to be prepared to make known the contents of this receipt. That is incredible."

"Let me tell you something. It was only this morning that the Earl of Selby learned from me that a copy of the receipt was in existence. He seemed to be very much startled when I told him of it."

George Barton laid a peculiar emphasis on these words.

"What! At the very moment when he must have known of the advertisement offering to show a copy of the list! My dear Barton," said the barrister, with an air of compassion, "really now, what can you have in your head? What can you expect me to think?"

"Le Breton," said young Barton, rising and leaning across the table, while he spoke with the greatest firmness and sincerity of manner, "my belief is that Pollard & Pollard will never show a correct list of those papers to any one. I ought to have thought of that earlier. I ought not to have shown them to you. I trust you as my father's intimate friend, and beg that you will forget that you have ever seen that list."

The barrister nodded.

"The truth is," he said, "my dear fellow, that all you have told me conveys no ideas to me whatever. I couldn't possibly advise you in the circumstances. I only say, don't be too certain that your father has perished in the manner you suppose—don't believe he is dead till you have absolute proofs—don't spare any exertion to discover the truth, and my last word is, don't let any absurd notions of honor or chivalry prevent you from disclosing in the proper quar-

ters any information you have which may tend to elucidate your father's fate."

"I am in a fearfully difficult position," said young Barton. "With all my inexperience, I have alone to try and counteract a conspiracy concocted by some of the shrewdest and most cunning heads that ever engaged in a great crime. I have to get at the bottom of a most dishonorable and criminal transaction, and I have to try to do this without injustice to people whom I have been taught to respect, without injury to innocent persons who may be involved in the consequences; and yet, at all hazards, I must and will vindicate my father's memory and take care that the authors of this dastardly crime shall meet the punishment they deserve. To kill such a man! So noble, so pure, so gentle, so good! so generous to his enemies, and so kind even to wrong-doers, sinners, and outcasts! Good God! the thought of the injustice of it nearly drives me mad! And to think that his murderers, those who planned and suggested his death in this violent and ignoble fashion, may go unpunished—may continue to live on and enjoy their ill-gotten wealth! By heaven! Le Breton, if I thought that were possible, I would renounce faith in anything but evil and selfishness!"

"Tut, tut!" said old Le Breton, who was moving uneasily about, in and out among the furniture, as if he were thridding a maze, his hands in his pockets and his elbows stuck out like the wings of an untrussed fowl—speaking to himself, of course. "I don't like this—overexcitement—brain-fever—quite in the 'Ercles' vein."

"But I am resolved," continued Barton, "and I trust I shall have the courage and the strength to do my duty in the matter."

"Amen!" said Le Breton, gently. "I have unbounded confidence in your abilities, but the task you are proposing to yourself, I can see well, would have taxed the intellect and the audacity of a Westbury. Above all, keep cool—as cool as you can—and remember I am always at your disposal."

The old barrister took an affectionate leave, but he shook his head as he went down-stairs.

"Never had a case so imperfectly stated in my life—not even by West & Greenall, who never state one at all, but in any case they send you all the documents. There is some infernal and unheard of mystery behind all this, or else poor George is in a bad way. The anxiety, I fear, will prove too much for him. Poor dear old Barton!"

As he stepped across the Temple there was a kind of dry, legal moisture in the old barrister's eyes, which he wiped away with his handkerchief.

Barton, left to himself, paced the room for a long time, buried in painful reflections. Recalling with the minutest care every word and incident of the interview he had had with the Earl of Selby, he tortured his ingenuity in efforts to sound the depths of that great tactician's mind. Was not his conduct during that interview strange and incomprehensible? Was the harshness of his first reception put on? Had he really suspected that such a man as his late agent had been guilty of embezzlement, and had run away to avoid the consequences?

The young man was inexperienced, and he was hardly able to conceive or correctly appreciate the profundity of the cynicism and unbelief engendered by the long experiences of such a life as that of the Earl of Selby—which was not, indeed, one life, but half a dozen lives wrapped in one. So that George Barton could not find any excuse for the peer's acceptance, even for a moment, of the base insinuations against his father's motives which had evidently been made by Pollard & Pollard.

Then the earl's suspicion of him—was it real or pretended? Was it not the astute diplomacy of a guilty man, who, to divert suspicion from himself, accused his accusers? Again, his affected kindness, and the abrupt and strange variations in his manner, his apparent anxiety to discredit the idea that the elder Barton had met with any foul play, his elaborate sarcasms leveled at the Circus theory, his suggestion of suicide, and the anger he exhibited when he discovered that some one was yet living who knew all that the missing agent had known of his—the earl's—weaknesses and wrong-doing? And then the sudden change in his tactics toward the close of the interview? What did it all mean? The more the young man pondered and puzzled over it, the more firmly he became convinced that Lord Selby knew something of his father's fate—was an accessory to the frightful crime by which his mouth had been forever silenced.

But again he shuddered at these awful suspicions which he could not repress, at the consequences which loomed up before him dark and terrible. He shrunk appalled from the prospect of dragging this peer before a court of justice, especially when he thought of the Selby family, of the Tilburys, with whom he had been so intimate, who had been so kind and gracious to him from his boyhood; and then one fair face seemed to rise up before him, in the bloom of early beauty, and with a form full of grace and charm; and eyes were bent upon him which had always seemed to carry in their soft, luminous depths the gentle and eternal brightness of the stars of heaven. Deep in the heart of this practical young Englishman there was a world of undiscovered poetry and passion. But when the vision had begun to soothe his soul with its sweetness, he checked himself and waved it back as if it were an evil spirit, and strove to shut his eyes and steel his heart, as, smiling a bitterly sarcastic smile at his own weakness and folly, he turned, with a dread determination in his face, to somber thoughts of justice and vengeance.

Thus he had spent more than an hour in painful struggle, when he was disturbed by a loud knocking at his outer door, which he had closed when Le Breton went out, with the hope of discouraging any visitors. This one, however, was evidently determined to get in, and fearing lest he might lose some important intelligence if he neglected seeing the person who was so importunate, he opened the door.

The Earl of Selby stood before him.

CHAPTER V.

IS IT LOVE—OR A SACRIFICE?

BLANCHE ERNESTINE were the names given by the late Marie, Countess of Selby, to an only daughter, who had grown up to be one of the most lovely and charming girls in London society. At eighteen, with all the freshness of complexion and firmness of physique of the English race added to the easy grace and vivacity of a Frenchwoman, the most brilliant *debut* of the season had been that of Lady Blanche Layton. When she made her reverence to the sovereign and kissed her hand, her Majesty, who had known and esteemed her mother, was so struck by the fresh loveliness of the girl's face and expression that, in a moment of motherly admiration, she drew the young beauty to her, and impressed the customary kiss upon her blooming cheek with an emotion which surprised the oldest courtiers, accustomed as they were to see the queen manifesting the goodness and kindness of the royal heart with all the warmth and *naïvete* of an *ingenue*, unspoiled by the flattery of a court or the splendor of her unequaled position.

The dowagers said that "Lady Blanche was a little *trop avancée*," but that, no doubt, was because she was the daughter of a French countess. In the eyes of the other sex, however, this was an additional charm—the combination of lightsome ease with perfect dignity of manner, the union of wit with ingenuousness being a very rare admixture of qualities in an Englishwoman.

The young Earl of Tilbury, among a host of gallants, had been vanquished by the graces of his cousin, graces which he had, moreover, special and unfair opportunities of studying in the intimacy of domestic life; and to the great contentment of the Earl of Selby, and also of the Countess of Tilbury, his mother, he had manifested a preference for Lady Blanche which was marked and serious. The countess, indeed, regarded her niece as a paragon. Lord Selby, who was better acquainted than any one else with the state of the young earl's rent-roll, knew that he could nowhere find for his daughter a more brilliant match. Other motives may have operated on his mind, which this history will disclose; but among them certainly were a sincere affection for his ward, and a judicious admiration of qualities which it had been his own duty, as Lord Tilbury's guardian, to study and to cultivate. The young peer did honor to his distinguished tutor. The worst of the fine schemes cherished for their two paragons by the noble brother and sister was that one of the most important parties, namely, the young lady herself, though she treated the young earl with most cousinly and familiar affection, seemed to regard the idea of any closer relationship with irreverent amusement. She was wont to annoy the earl, her father, by the lightness which she permitted herself to display in regard to this high question of family policy whenever he tried to approach the subject with her in a serious manner.

"Edward," she said, referring to Lord Tilbury, "has never

spoken to me on such matters, and I have no right or reason to suppose he ever will"—the little sinner. "If ever he should, I will give him a plain answer. I hope he won't, because he is such a jolly fellow, and quite perfect as a cousin. There is time enough, you dear, old, troublesome papa, to think about those things. Who would waltz with me if I were engaged? I should grow against the walls like a melancholy sprig of ivy—"

"A magnolia," suggested the earl.

"If you prefer it, papa, splendid—but wasting my sweetness. I am young, I scarcely know my own heart; but I think," and here she would put her head saucily on one side and peer at her father through her half-closed lashes—"the man who has made the deepest impression up to this moment is Lord M'Corquodale. He is honest and steady and economic and religious—and so very graceful! And though he is not rich, you might get him made a governor-general, you know. Besides, in marrying him one would make accounts right with both worlds."

The earl's eyes used to sparkle with a strange green light when his daughter thus teased him.

Lord M'Corquodale was a tall, bony Scotch peer, about six feet three in height, who loved, on the slightest pretext, to array himself in his national costume, and who was at once the amusement of the young ladies and the horror of the dowagers. He used to carry tracts into society, and slip them surreptitiously into men's hats or ladies' muffs and bags. Tilbury declared that one of his grooms had seen M'Corquodale leading a division of the Salvation Army through the streets of the East End, and singing the tune of a comic song to words of pious joviality. No one could have been more awkward with greater sincerity than this useful knave of hearts, whom Lady Blanche used to play out so thoughtlessly; and he was endowed with all the quaint, profound, methodic conceit of his race. It really was the case that this young and gaunt Scotch Don Quixote had endeavored to manifest, after his fashion, a violent admiration for the beauty of the season, though he was only a Caledonian nobleman with about six thousand a year. But the earl, who had a keen wit, and dearly loved a joke, soon trumped this particular card, for he asked M'Corquodale to lunch, and obliged his daughter to spend two mortal hours in hearing the English language delivered, in a somewhat barbarous shape, over a nutmeg-grater, the torture ending with the presentation of a small *fasciculus* of tracts, which he said "were spa-s-shilly adapted to the needs and tastes of moder-rn la-adies of culty-ar-r."

"Now," said the earl, laughing, when his guest had departed, "if you will let me know, Blanche, when you have finished those tracts, I will ask him to bring a fresh bundle, and a Scotch minister to expound them. For you, my dear, I am prepared to make any sacrifice."

"My dear earl, if ever you bring that creature again to lunch, I shall go to bed and send for the queen's physician. So your lunch will cost you dear."

But Lady Blanche never mentioned the Scotch peer afterward in this connection. Still, the winning of the game appeared to the earl to be as far off as ever.

An hour after the Earl of Selby had left the Tilbury mansion in Grosvenor Place, this young lady presented herself at the door in a charming little *coupé* which her father had given her, and after a brief parley with Simpson, who defended the gate manfully, she broke through all the defenses, routed Mrs. Collops, and was soon sitting in the boudoir with the Countess of Tilbury.

The countess had been for years one of the most dignified and estimable figures in London society. Though she was not handsome, the pleasing traits of her face, which was full of intelligence, her tall and commanding figure, the nobility of her carriage and manner, invested her with a distinction which had been recognized in many of the most brilliant courts of Europe, and had won the regard and affection of her sovereign. She had much of the cleverness, and some of the cynicism, of her brother, without any of his malice. In experience and tact she was a thorough woman of the world; yet her heart had not been hardened, her natural sympathies had not been dried up by that incessant contact with selfish and ignoble passions which an intimate knowledge of society involves. That she had prejudices, it would be useless to deny. She was aristocratic to the backbone, a conservative of conservatives, and she cherished with pride the privileges of rank and wealth. But her natural goodness of heart often led her to unbend from these rigid notions, and to the surprise of those who knew her best, prompted her to acts which appeared to be quite inconsistent with her proud and lofty principles.

When, upon the insistent summons of her niece, she came out of her son's sick-room, and entered the boudoir, her firm and stately features were disordered and careworn. A charming picture indeed was that which awaited her, a charming cheek that laid its downy freshness against her dry and fevered skin, a charming mouth that kissed her on either side in true French fahion, and a lovely little hand that passed its soothing touch over her hair, abundant, but sprinkled with gray, which she was too proud to conceal. But the chords of her heart were too tightly strained by anxiety and sorrow to allow her to show much expansion under these affectionate fondlings.

"My poor Aunt Dora!" said the girl, in a sweet, musical voice; "how pale and ill you look! How is he?"

The countess had borne up through the terrible days and nights with iron resolution. She would not allow herself for a moment to doubt that her son would recover; but when this simple question was put to her by Lady Blanche she suddenly felt as if an arrow had gone through her brain, and putting her hands to her head, she said, in a voice of anguish,

"Oh, don't ask me, my dear. It is simply dreadful. Not a word—not a movement since he was carried in there senseless. My heart is breaking!"

She remained for a few moments with her hands clasped over her eyes.

Lady Blanche stood gently stroking the hands that looked so white and thin.

"Aunt," she suddenly cried—"Aunt Dora, can I do anything?"

"You, dear!" said the countess, letting her hands drop, and look-

ing with surprise at her niece, whose face had suddenly grown crimson, while her eyes endeavored to brave the scrutiny of her aunt's gaze. "Why, child, what can you do?"

"Couldn't I help you, aunt? Could I not come and assist you to —nurse him—or do anything to relieve you?"

A faint smile passed for an instant, like a glint of sunshine from a cloud-wrapped sky, across the worn face of the countess, and she earnestly examined the sweet, candid features before her, as if to read the thoughts that were written in them. A slight thrill of pleasure had passed through her spirit, but, as the maiden's eyes fell before her searching glance, her face resumed its troubled aspect.

"My dear Blanche," she said, quietly, "it is very good of you to think of it, but what you propose is impossible."

"You know I am his cousin. Why should I not come and help you?"

"My dear, it is because you are only his cousin that such a thing is out of the question. If—if—" The countess hesitated and watched the color come and go in her niece's delicate cheeks. "No matter what I was going to say. I was forgetting myself. My poor head is quite topsy-turvy! Don't think any more about it, my dear. We have the best assistance, and you could do no good."

"But, aunt," cried the girl, with vivacity, "you said 'if.' Were you not going to say that if—if—he—or rather Edward and I were going to be more than cousins—I will out with it—if we were engaged—then you would think it right to let me help you in nursing him?"

The blush had deepened in Lady Blanche's cheeks as she uttered these words, and the countess could not help admiring the mingled modesty and grace and courage of her niece. But she said,

"Is this an avowal, Blanche? If it is, no one could be more happy to hear it than I, though God knows whether it may not be too late—be only the beginning of sorrow for you. Has he ever spoken to you? Has anything serious ever passed between you?"

Lady Blanche's long lashes fell over her violet eyes, and her face became pale.

"No, aunt, nothing but fun, you know, little coquetries, but—but—I know he likes me."

"Then," said the countess, with a slight asperity in her voice, and some disappointment, and even anger, marked in her features, "what on earth do you mean, dear Blanche? No woman who respects herself—"

"Stop!" said Lady Blanche, rising, and putting her hand over her aunt's lips. "Don't say what you were going to say, please! You don't understand me, my dear Aunt Dora. I have too much self-respect to throw myself at any one's head, *ça va sans dire.* I am a Selby. Perhaps I am foolish, romantic, but at all events no one will know of it but you. Edward has never said a word to me, but I am a woman, and I can tell what he felt and what he was longing to say. And—what I felt was this—I know you will call me very silly and romantic, but I will confess: 'Here is poor Edward lying between life and death. If he loves me as I think he does, then, in his weakness and pain, it will be a comfort to him to have me there, near him, perhaps it may save his life.' So, my

dear aunt, I thought I would offer to come and help you, because, you see, supposing it were not as I thought, I am his cousin, and no harm would be done; every one would think it natural for me to come and help you; and if it should turn out to be the other way, you know, then I should have done my duty, which is to save him, for you, and for his own sake, for he is a good and noble fellow—Oh me, what a stupid girl I am!"

And Lady Blanche, throwing herself on her knees, buried her face in the ample folds of Lady Tilbury's gown, and sobbed like a child.

The countess was greatly moved. Slipping off the charming little hat, which Lady Blanche's grief threatened with destruction, she caressed the girl's hair with her fingers.

"*Tête folle!*" she said to herself. "She gets all this exaltation from her mother." Every weakness of the flesh or spirit is traced in England to foreigners, even if it be necessary to go back to the Conquest for it. "Is this love, or a sacrifice?"

Presently she leaned over and murmured in her niece's ear,

"Blanche dearest, tell me, tell me truly, as you would have done to your mother, do you really love him? Would you give yourself to him body and soul, with all your heart, if he were well now here, and were to ask you?"

Blanche trembled. She did not reply. The countess's face was gentle, but a shadow crossed it.

"What do you say?" she asked, a little more decidedly.

Still no answer. Blanche was trembling more and more. The shade deepened on the face of the countess.

"Then," she said at last, in a deeply disappointed tone—"then, my dear, this was not love, but a sacrifice!"

"Aunt," cried the young lady, suddenly throwing her head back, and looking straight into her ladyship's eyes, "can't you understand? I am a little goose—I know I don't love Edward enough to marry him—if he were quite well and out of danger, but to save his life and make you happy, you know—well, don't you see?—I would do anything!"

"You little idiot!" cried the countess, clasping her in her arms and kissing her with an emphasis quite out of harmony with her wonted calm and dignity of manner. "I have a great mind to take you at your word, and make you nurse and marry him—there!"

"Well, aunt, I am quite ready."

"But you don't love him."

"I am not in love with him—no. I love him—yes, like a brother."

"My dear Blanche," said Lady Tilbury, "this little romance, which, let me tell you, was a very absurd and perilous one, shall have no *denouement*. God forbid that you should ever give yourself in marriage to any one whom you did not love with all your heart—better, let us hope, than you do your 'brother'—Alfred, for instance."

There was a little malice in this remark, for the eldest son of the Earl of Selby was by no means a lovable person, and certainly not one of Blanche's favorite heroes.

"Well, dearest aunt," said the blushing girl, looking a little ashamed, but appealing to the countess with her hands together in a pretty gesture, which she, no doubt, also got from her mother, for

no Englishwoman pure-blooded could have imitated it, "you understand me, don't you? And you will forgive me, won't you? And you will forget all about it and never say a word about it to him or to any human being? I know I can trust you."

"You may, my dear Blanche, implicitly. I am not sorry to have had this insight into a nature so fresh and romantic. I had begun to disbelieve in romantic sentiments, except in novels—the world is becoming so profoundly practical and scientific, and our young ladies so cold and so egoistic. But I am afraid, my dear, that Madame Letellier let you read too many novels—I must have a talk with you about that. There are so few men or women writers who seem to have experience of the healthier side of human nature, or at least the capacity to describe it. But, good gracious, what is that? I have been forgetting my dear boy. Alas! we have been dreaming, both of us, for the last twenty minutes. See who is knocking at the door."

The face of the sedate Mrs. Collops appeared, a glitter in her dark eyes and a faint smile on her lips. She was evidently excited.

"Your ladyship—your ladyship! He has spoken—he is asking for you!"

"Thank God he is saved!" cried the countess, rising and running to the door. "Go away, Blanche, immediately. I will send a note over to-night. Good-by, dear;" and she disappeared in the corridor.

"You have brought good luck, my lady!" said Mrs. Collops, smoothing her big nursing-apron with both hands, and fixing her dark eyes, with a curious glint in them, on the beautiful face before her, which was moved by a strange variety of feelings.

"I hope so, Mrs. Collops," said Blanche, suddenly recovering her self-possession, and putting on her dignity. "Will you please come with me to the hall door?"

CHAPTER VI.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE earl, when he left the mansion in Grosvenor Place, took his seat in a hansom, with a smile on his face. He never allowed a servant to surprise his anxieties. He had given the driver the address of his solicitors in Lincoln's Inn Fields. But as he drove down to the lawyers' quarters, any one who had been close to him would have seen, underneath the cool and cynical expression which his face usually wore, that some powerful emotions were agitating his mind. His eyes looked dreamy and haggard, his fingers were clasped nervously on the handle of his umbrella, his brow was contracted with thought of an evidently painful character. All this, however, did not prevent the practiced man of the world from seeing and saluting many friends on his way down Piccadilly, or from detecting and formally recognizing the presence on the pavement of the Home Secretary, who, catching sight of him, made a sign indicating a wish to speak to him. The peer was a little surprised at this, for they were not on the same side in politics, and far from intimate. His astonishment was greater when Sir Walter Grandi-

son, leaning over into the hansom, with a solemn and confidential air said,

"Earl, have you heard anything yet of your missing steward?"

"No, Sir Walter Grandison," replied the earl, regarding his interlocutor with a mixed expression of hauteur and surprise. "May I venture to ask what is the ground of the interest you take in the matter?"

"Only," said the secretary, with a benevolent smile, "that I am anxious to spare you unnecessary annoyance. Do you forget that I am practically head policeman? They have taken it into their heads in Scotland Yard that the person who was exploded the other day in Regent Circus was your agent, whose name, if I remember rightly, was Barton, and, naturally, they are making every effort to ascertain whether there was anything in his position and circumstances to make it probable that some one had an interest in putting him out of the way."

"Forgive me, Sir Walter," said the peer, with a smile, "if I had for the moment forgotten the distinguished official attribution you have properly reminded me of; but although I am prepared for anything under a Birmingham government, I assume that you are not proposing to make an inquisition, in this time and place, in relation to my personal responsibility for my agent's fate?"

The secretary smiled too. The earl's manner was not in the least offensive.

"On the contrary, my dear earl, I was going to tell you frankly that I think they are on the wrong tack; but, you see, I can not prevent them from following up such clews as they fancy they have, and it occurred to me, on seeing you, that their inquiries might cause you and your family considerable inconvenience. Are you taking any steps to ascertain what has become of the man? I should sincerely advise you to leave no stone unturned to discover his whereabouts without delay, and thus put a stop to this absurd inquiry, which, I am convinced, is only diverting the energies of the police in a false direction. I hope you will not consider that I have presumed too far in giving you this friendly hint?"

"On the contrary, it is extremely obliging of you, my dear Sir Walter," replied the peer, calmly smiling in the other's face and speaking with great cordiality, "to have gone out of your way to give me this intimation. There was nothing in my own relations with Mr. Barton to make me at all anxious about any inquiries the police may think fit to institute. I place myself entirely at their service. Still, as you say, no one cares to have private and family affairs ripped up before the public. I happen at this moment to be on my way to my solicitors, and I will urge them to push forward their inquiries about Barton's fate with all the energy they can. The whole affair is mysterious and inexplicable. Barton had all my confidence, and I can conceive of no reason, under any circumstances which are known to me, for his running away or being murdered. I shall always feel indebted to you for this considerate act, the more that you and I so seldom have an opportunity of exchanging courtesies. This is a real kindness." Smiling again, the earl held out his hand and pressed that of the secretary with an impressive "Thank you—most sincerely."

As the hansom drove off, the smile died away, and the peer's face became longer and thinner. The Home Secretary went off, too, with a smile of satisfaction. He felt that he had done a friendly act. Whether it were a judicious one was a question on which we should like to have had Mr. Sontag's opinion. It certainly was not judicial. He had given a valuable hint to the peer if he really had anything to fear from the curiosity of the police, one that he certainly would not have given to a less distinguished man. It was true that, after having sifted Mr. Sontag's theory with some care, the Home Secretary had pronounced it to be "moonshine," but in warning the earl, he was not giving the chief detective a fair chance, and as it afterward turned out, this little incident was the means of conveying to the principal criminals a premature hint of the discoveries which had been made.

When the earl entered the private rooms occupied by the partners in the offices of Messrs. Pollard & Pollard, whose immense business filled every room in No. 155, the large old mansion in Lincoln's Inn Fields which had once been the residence of a chief-justice, he found them engaged in close conference. A large tin box—marked "*Estate of the Rt. Hon. the Earl of Tilbury, K. G., dec'd*"—lay open on the floor, disclosing a portentous array of papers. The faces of both the partners were flushed. They appeared to have been having an agitated discussion. The earl, whose susceptibility was very delicate, promptly appreciated this fact, and his appreciation was confirmed by the tone of their voices when they spoke.

The senior partner, Mr. Joseph Pollard, was a middle-aged stout man, of medium height, with a broad, rather plebeian face, thick but firm lips, short-cut, grisly hair, bristling above a square forehead, and brush-like whiskers of the same character. His gray eyes were bright and prominent. He was short-sighted, wearing powerful glasses in a golden-rimmed *pince-nez*. His lower face, closely shaven, was full, and the chin heavy, indicating animal, but not moral doggedness. The junior partner, nephew of the senior, was strikingly different from his relative. He was dark, tall, and thin, with rather fine-cut features, black hair and eyes, and an alert, foppish manner. Moreover, he was fashionably and carefully dressed, while the elder partner wore a coat of somewhat ancient cut, and exhibiting a tendency to polish which would have been more in keeping on the surface of a mahogany table. Mr. Charles Pollard was the gentleman of the partnership, its ornamental as well as useful member, and usually had to discharge the duty of interviewing arisocratic clients, of whom a large number were to be found in the long list of the firm's *clientèle*. The house had existed for four generations, having originated with two brothers, and being still entirely a family business. The early death of a brother, Mr. Samuel Pollard, had brought his son upon the scene as a principal somewhat more prematurely than was consistent with the historic antecedents of the firm. In the effusive respect with which these two received the earl, his quick eye detected a certain mixture of defiance and embarrassment. They had evidently been talking about him, and about business which concerned him.

"Your lordship has come in quite *à propos*," said the younger of the two, who was easier and more talkative than his uncle, and who

liked to interlard his conversation with a few French phrases he had picked up at hap-hazard, for his father had not done him justice in his education. At sixteen, after passing through a dissenting school in Stoke Newington, where French was regarded with suspicion as a key to much ungodly literature, he had been put to training in the office. "We have just been having a very anxious conference in regard to the state of your lordship's affairs. You have, of course, perused the advertisement?"

"What advertisement?" inquired the earl, with vivacity.

"In the morning newspapers, my lord, relating to Mr. Barton."

"No," said the peer, with an anxiety which was not affected, and which proved that George Barton's suspicion in this respect had been unfounded. "Who has been advertising? and about what?" His tone was peremptory and insolent.

"My lord," returned the younger Pollard, shrinking from the firm glance the peer had fixed on him, and convinced that his client was speaking candidly, "in a conference which—ah—my partner and I had together yesterday, with regard to the—ah—very unpleasant state of—ah—your affairs, and in connection especially with this mysterious disappearance of—ah—Mr. Barton, we came to the conclusion that it would—it might, my lord"—he looked at the earl with a subjective meaning in his glance, which seemed to puzzle the latter for an instant—"be discreet, I might say a good *coup*, for us—your lordship, you know, and ourselves—to appear on the scene, and evince some anxiety to discover the whereabouts of your late—I meant to say of Mr. Barton."

"Certainly. Why not? That is precisely what I came here to urge you to use every effort to discover."

Mr. Joseph Pollard moved uneasily in his chair.

"So, my lord," continued Mr. Charles, "we drew up this advertisement, which we supposed would have met your lordship's eye." He took up a newspaper from the table.

The earl, with a nervous movement, snatched it out of the solicitor's hand, and ran his eyes over it in a couple of seconds. His face expressed a vivid dissatisfaction.

"I wish, gentlemen," he said, with some asperity, "you would consult me before you take important action like this in my name and concerning my affairs."

"Well, my lord," said the elder Pollard, who had been sitting silently watching the peer through his glasses, and now spoke with a suppressed defiance in his tone, "as the matter is in our hands, and to some extent—I must remind your lordship—concerns us jointly, we thought we might take the not very important step we have done without troubling your lordship."

There was a curiously significant undertone in the slow, deliberate utterance of the speaker which struck the earl unpleasantly. He glanced quickly from one to the other, and for a moment his wonted hardiness and *aplomb* appeared to have forsaken him—he even lowered his eyes under the glassy stare of the attorney. But he recovered himself instantly.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a cold, stern voice, "circumstances have, to some extent—as Mr. Joseph Pollard has expressed—placed me in rather disagreeable co-relations with you, in a matter which

concerns my character and position, and also implicates yours. You are aware of the anxiety this has given me. You are also witnesses of my readiness to make any sacrifice to extricate myself from the compromising position into which I was drawn—I must say it—by my faith in your ability to carry out engagements which you personally entered into with me, which engagements, unfortunately, you have been unable to fulfill. I have the conviction that, if I unhappily allowed myself to drift into a situation in which my honor, a large portion of my fortune, and my position in society are imperiled, it was owing, in no small degree, to misplaced confidence in your power and willingness to carry me through. I assure you I do not forget that, in a moment of acute pressure, I allowed myself to be associated with you in that which was dishonorable and criminal!"

He put an emphasis on the last word both by voice and look.

"Your lordship had full knowledge of all the circumstances," said Mr. Pollard the younger, interrupting him, rather weakly, for the earl had already admitted it. "We have all the proofs here in writing, if it is necessary to appeal to them." And he pointed with a long, bony finger, the aspect of which struck the susceptible peer at the moment with a chilling sensation, to the great tin box lying upon the floor with its lid thrown back, and showing, that if quantity were enough in documentary evidence to render it unimpeachable, there was no deficiency in this case. The earl involuntarily threw a glance at the box and its contents, which the worthy partners had evidently been overhauling, and a slight tremor passed for an instant through his frame; but he turned again, with a lively look toward Mr. Charles Pollard, and said,

"I had, sir—I own it—and it is neither to my credit—nor to yours!"

The two legal gentlemen shrugged their shoulders, and turned out their palms, and gazed at each other with that sort of astonishment which might have been expressed by the gestures of two angels, into whose fair faces some sinner whom they had been trying to save had thrown a gross injury. Was this the kind of gratitude they were to receive for their self-abnegation—for having compromised themselves to rescue this peer of the realm from a perilous situation?

"We have served your lordship with only too much devotion," said the elder Pollard, in a melancholy voice, "and hence the awkward situation in which we find ourselves placed. Your lordship probably deems it of little importance that our professional reputation and the future of our families are in serious peril?"

Lord Selby could hardly repress a smile at the tragic solemnity with which Mr. Joseph Pollard uttered these words. The humor passed away in a moment, and he turned and looked curiously at the speaker.

"I don't quite see," he said, "how the situation has been made any more serious for you by anything that has lately happened."

"Your lordship knows that it is a criminal matter for both yourself and us, if the facts should ever be allowed to transpire," said Mr. Charles Pollard, his dark eyes sparkling with a malevolent expression.

"Possibly," said the earl, "though I do not think that those concerned would be likely to treat it as such. My preoccupation, Mr. Pollard, unlike yours, has not been to save myself from a criminal process, or from the legal consequences of my own wrong and foolish acts. If I have been anxious, at whatever sacrifice, to have that unfortunate affair settled, it is because I have deeply and sincerely regretted the course I took; it is because a disclosure would wound a number of innocent and honorable relatives and friends, whose good opinion I should lose forever if they came to know of my criminal weakness; it is because I would save others from a great unhappiness, and not alone, I hope, from the selfish motive of extricating myself from an odious position."

The earl had risen, and delivered these words with force and spirit.

The partners were evidently disconcerted by the high tone adopted toward them by the man who owned to having been concerned with them in a questionable, or, as he termed it, a "criminal" transaction. His attitude was unexpected; it dislocated some line of action on which they had previously settled. Each looked at the other, as if to inquire what card he was to play in the new circumstances of the game. Mr. Charles Pollard, however, answered the earl.

"Well, my lord," he said, blandly, "is not this precisely the object we have in view? We always thought that your lordship exaggerated the importance of the bearings of that transaction. Neither we nor you had any criminal intention. The object simply was to save you from inconvenience and a great loss. All would have gone well but for the intervention of Mr. Barton in the business, and his becoming cognizant of facts which need never have gone further than your lordship and ourselves. In some aspects of the case, his —ah—disappearance, to whatever circumstances it may be due, is—do you not think?—a distinct relief. We have nothing now to do but to complete the arrangements which will secure the burial of the matter in oblivion."

"My partner is quite right," said Mr. Joseph Pollard. "We are all three in the same boat; the question is how we can best extricate ourselves from the difficult position in which we are placed."

Something like an electric shock went through the peer's body at these blunt words. His face assumed an extraordinary expression, in which shame, revolted pride, and diplomatic caution seemed to be struggling for mastery. He, the tenth earl, and one of the proudest and most eminent of the English aristocracy, "in the same boat" with a couple of vulgar attorneys! The splendor and honor of his peerage, his supremacy in politics and society, his own personal character, and his immense fortune, thrown into the same scale with the interests of a couple of money-grubbing solicitors!

Such a thought flashed across his mind, but he was abler than either of his interlocutors, a diplomatist of the first order, with all the advantages of social superiority. He summoned all his forces. Something told him the moment was critical. Even in this base association he had a moral supremacy. Even in this iniquitous combination the superiority of his rank and social position asserted itself.

"Mr. Pollard," he replied, calmly, but with a sarcastic intonation, "if we are, as you say, sir, 'all in the same boat,' will you at least, then, permit me, as the owner of the boat, to take the helm? I confess I am puzzled to make out what has brought on this unpleasant discussion. I made the very simple remark that the step you had taken in advertising in such terms for poor Barton was one you ought not to have taken without consulting me. I do not approve of it; I do not see the object of it; I think it ill-advised. The more I reflect upon it, the less do I feel inclined to accept your theory of Barton's disappearance. At first, when I was annoyed at his absence and the singular loss of the bonds, I hastily adopted your suggestion--I feared that something had gone wrong in his accounts. Now I doubt it. Why, at the very moment when he so mysteriously disappeared, what was he doing? He was engaged with you in trying to raise the money to wipe out the record of a compromising transaction for which he was not responsible. Why should he disappear?"

"It is sometimes very difficult," said the elder Pollard, judiciously, "to imagine the motives that have led a man to criminal or questionable conduct. Mr. Barton was your agent for twenty-five years. You have probably never examined his accounts."

"At his own request they have been audited every year by Twyford--one of the best auditors in England."

"Well, but, earl, you forget. The bonds—"

"Very well, Mr. Pollard, the bonds. What could he do with them—if he had them? We have the numbers. You know they are not negotiable without extreme peril of detection. What on earth would he carry off those documents for? And that brings me to this advertisement. It is impolitic for two reasons. First, before making public the fact that my agent had disappeared, it would surely have been well to exhaust all the resources of the police and private detective agencies. Secondly, the form of the advertisement is objectionable. You offer to exhibit a list of the missing documents! This is inconceivable folly. You risk an exposure of the very fact we are desirous of concealing. No one knows of the existence of the charge on my sister's property except ourselves. You remember she was asked not to say anything about it to her son, on the ground that it was only a temporary loan to meet some unexpected call on his estates."

The two solicitors remained silent and embarrassed.

"Now," pursued the earl, "allow me to request an explanation. It was arranged before I left London for Selby that Barton should hand you over those documents and papers. I thought he had done so. If he did not, it must have been because some difficulties had arisen between him and yourselves with regard to the terms of that arrangement. What were those difficulties? and where are those papers?"

Speaking with a good deal of energy and vivacity, and as if he were a judge interrogating an unwilling witness, rather than an accomplice in conference with his fellow-conspirators, the earl, as he put this last question, stretched out his hand toward the senior partner, and his eye penetrated him with a fire and keenness that might well have shaken his professional stolidity. He had been sitting

before Lord Selby with his head between his shoulders, and his two fat hands clasped together in a lump on his solid paunch. When this query, aimed at him like a rocket, suddenly burst upon him he started. His glasses turned interrogatively to his nephew, who, with a nervous movement of his head, threw an uneasy glance at his uncle.

The earl surprised this exchange of looks.

"I say again, Mr. Pollard, where are they?"

"My lord," said the younger of the two solicitors, "you will have observed the advertisement says—"

"D—n the advertisement, sir," interrupted the earl, raising his voice, and speaking in a fury. "The advertisement pretends that Mr. Barton still has those documents, which it had been agreed—settled—should be given up to you, and, as I had every reason to suppose, had been placed in your hands. In fact, this morning, by pure hazard a few minutes before I came here, I had an interview with young George Barton, who, I can tell you, is a youth of surprising ability, and by no means to be trifled with. He is resolved to sift the whole business to the bottom. Mr. George Barton, junior, then informed me that his father had handed you all the documents—had taken your receipt for them; a receipt which his son perused, and of which, I believe, he has a copy. That receipt, I understand, was dated on the previous Saturday or Monday."

The partners looked at one another, and at the earl, with unfeigned astonishment.

"Young Barton's ability seems only to be surpassed," said old Mr. Pollard, "by his father's indiscretion and want of good faith. He has evidently shown to his son a paper which he was bound by professional honor, and by his duty and obligations to you, to keep secret. This throws a good deal of light on his character. I confess I am deeply disappointed to hear this of him."

"Never mind George Barton's character just now, Mr. Pollard," said the earl, coolly. "Was there such a receipt in existence?"

"My lord, this was precisely one of the matters on which we were going to speak to you," replied Mr. Pollard, "if it had not been prematurely brought forward in this—ah—somewhat unpleasant manner. There was such a receipt, and we regretted to have discovered only this morning, that, in our blind confidence in Mr. Barton, we had carelessly omitted to ask him to return it to us when we handed him back the papers."

"You handed him back the papers!" cried the earl, not attempting to conceal the incredulity of his look and tone.

"Yes," replied Mr. Joseph Pollard, calmly gazing at the peer through his spectacles, "it is perfectly true; although it was a matter which ought not, under any circumstances, Lord Selby—under—any—circumstances whatever—to have been confided to a young man quite disconnected from the business, and apparently quite lacking in discretion, since he should have addressed himself to us, and not to you, if he had any communications to make regarding it. I say it is perfectly correct that Mr. Barton brought those papers here—on Friday or Saturday, I think—" said Mr. Joseph, with the air of a man whose memory was too valuable to be charged with a matter of small importance—

"Monday," said Mr. Charles, nodding.

"Ah! Monday. Well, perhaps you are right; whenever it was, the documents were received, and a receipt was given for them in the usual form. The documents, I think, were placed in our safe, Joseph?"

"They were—awaiting the earl's return."

"Precisely, to await your lordship's return. On the afternoon, however, of Tuesday—the 25th—"

"Tuesday the 25th," assented the nephew, like a tenor in an operatic duet.

"Mr. Barton called here. He seemed agitated and out of sorts, and permitted himself to use some observations as to the part which we had taken in these affairs, which we considered to be extremely unprofessional—"

"And offensive," put in the nephew.

"And offensive—as my partner justly observes. I think, Charles, we were rather struck by his curious manner, and remarked upon it after he had left?"

"We were," chimed in Mr. Charles.

The duet, having started so well, was running on merrily. By his deliberation and this little by-play, Mr. Joseph had managed to convey to Mr. Charles the cue to the song that was to be sung.

"We don't know what had aroused his suspicions, or whether he was out of sorts; perhaps the extraordinary amount of work, and anxiety he had undergone during the past few weeks had affected his brain—country practitioners are not accustomed to the sort of pressure which London solicitors are forced to endure every day—and he threw out a hint—"

"A very broad hint," said Mr. Joseph.

"That he had been premature in imparting those documents to us before all the arrangements had been completed, and especially as he had only your verbal and not your written instructions to hand them over. We were a little astonished by this line, but of course we immediately took the papers out of the safe and handed them to him. He placed them in his bag, and we never saw them again. It was this which increased, in our view, the suspiciousness of Mr. Barton's disappearance."

"And the receipt?" said the earl, who had been listening to all this in perfect silence, while he closely watched the faces of the two speakers—"what became of the receipt?"

"The truth is," said young Mr. Pollard, with a smile, "we never thought of the receipt. It was my fault. But in any case we should not have regarded it as a matter of much consequence. It was outside the bounds of probability that both Mr. Barton and the documents would disappear."

"And supposing that young Barton should affirm that his father did not bring back the bag of papers to the Temple, where he was staying with his son, what would be your theory?" inquired the earl, who appeared to be satisfied with their explanation.

"Really, my lord," said Mr. Joseph Pollard, with an ingenuous smile, "we are quite unable to form any theory about a disappearance which is so mysterious. I don't suppose Mr. Barton would take those documents to the Temple at all. He ought, I presume,

to have deposited them at your bankers. We thought so at least, and we accordingly inquired on your behalf, and you remember we reported to you that they were not in their hands."

"That is true," said the earl, struck by this remark. "In that case Barton should have taken the papers to the bankers. It is inexplicable. You did not mention to me before, by the way, this agitation in Barton's manner of which you now speak, and the words that had passed between you."

"The truth is, my lord, that since this unfortunate disappearance, and what with our other anxieties and the perilous condition of the Earl of Tilbury, we have hardly had time to consider the exact bearing of these little circumstances upon the mystery of Mr. Barton's conduct. We intended to have told you of this to-day. Of course, it may be unimportant, but, on the other hand, it may help to throw some light on the mystery."

"It may," said the peer, thoughtfully. "George Barton had one of the hardest heads I ever saw, but of late he has been fearfully worried and overworked. By the way," he added, suddenly recollecting himself, "I met the Home Secretary on my way here. He is an obliging person, and seems to be proud of his connection with the control of the police—he amused me by calling himself the 'head-policeman.' It apears the detectives in Scotland Yard have taken the crazy notion into their heads that the victim of that strange calamity in Regent Circus, which had such dire results for poor Tilbury, was none other than Barton."

The two partners started, and their faces grew pale, whether with consternation or horror or surprise it was impossible to distinguish.

"George Barton!" they cried in chorus. "Ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous, as you say. And, if true, one of the most astounding marvels in the chapter of accidents which the world has ever witnessed. George Barton himself dying in this extraordinary way, and nearly killing at the same time a peer, the accounts of whose estates he was engaged in winding up. Such a fortuitous concourse of circumstances would be without parallel even in fiction—outside the 'Thousand and One Nights' or 'Baron Munchausen!' Still, they are not without grounds for their suspicion. Young Barton is so persuaded of the truth of it that he has put on mourning, and I am satisfied he is sincere. They have hit upon some very singular and striking coincidences. George Barton tells me he is prepared to swear that the hand found on the roof in Oxford Street is that of his father. It seems my agent had some special deformity in the little finger of his right hand, though for all the years I knew him I had never noticed it. The young man showed me that he also has a similar peculiarity inherited from the father. Again, the police have found a minute particle of a watch-dial, with lettering similar to that on a watch I gave to Mr. Barton myself—one of Frodsham's. These facts are very curious, to say the least of it."

The partners smiled in a somewhat constrained manner, and the nephew remarked,

"They are always finding mare's nests in Scotland Yard. It is quite a *repertoire* of them."

The peer was too preoccupied to notice the peculiarity of Mr. Charles Pollard's solecisms.

"Of course," he continued, "the idea is absurd. Barton was not a man to commit suicide, unless he had gone clean mad."

"He may have done—he may have done!" said the elder Pollard, shaking his head with great solemnity. "In these days of high pressure there is no accounting for the aberrations of intellect."

While the junior member threw a glance of admiration at his partner, the peer pursued his reflections, regardless of Mr. Pollard's philosophical apothegms.

"He may have fallen into some ambush," said the earl. "At all events, gentlemen"—and here his voice grew more incisive, and arrested their attention—"you will be good enough to direct all your practical skill and ingenuity to the solution of the question at once—What has become of him? The police will commence an immediate inquiry into Barton's recent movements and transactions. If they come to me, I shall feel obliged to give them at least a general outline of the facts."

"But, my lord, surely—" cried each of the partners, in undisguised alarm.

"Stop!" cried the earl; "I shall not needlessly betray anything it is our—'joint and several' interest, I think you would call it?—not to divulge—but in the interests of justice, and to spare the memory of an honorable man from defamation, I certainly should not hesitate, if it were absolutely necessary, to sacrifice myself."

"And us!" said Mr. Joseph Pollard, in a deep, indignant voice. "Take care, my lord, what you do. You will never be able to hold up your head again if you disclose the transaction with Lady Tilbury, and the delicate affairs upon which Mr. Barton was engaged. I respectfully submit that you have no right to betray our confidence. If you have no regard for yourself, we are entitled to some consideration at your hands. If you do that, you will understand that we shall not hesitate to use every possible means to protect ourselves."

"What consideration, sir?" said the earl, coldly and sternly, offended at the menace. "I have had to rue bitterly the consequences of my relations with you. It was your evil suggestion which, working on my weakness in an hour of acute crisis, led me to be guilty of an act which I would now cut off my right hand—nay, sacrifice my life, to have undone and wiped out of the record of my existence!"

Mr. Charles Pollard, alarmed at the rising storm, hastened to intervene.

"My uncle has been a little hasty, my lord. I am sure he did not mean to offend you. He evidently mistook your intentions. Of course it is only in the last resort that you would feel it necessary to afford any compromising particulars to the police. I don't see that such a necessity can ever arise. If it did, we should be the first to join you in helping to clear the memory of Mr. Barton. It seems to me—you will forgive me for saying so—that instead of disputing about the course to be taken, we should be much more usefully employed in considering how we can utilize the absence of Mr. Barton to complete the settlement we had arrived at, and free

your lordship's mind from any further anxiety about the transaction which has given your lordship so much pain."

"In 'utilizing the absence of Mr. Barton,'" replied the peer, with sarcastic emphasis, "let it at least be understood that, unless indubitable evidence of his wrong-doing is forthcoming, we shall on no account, through any reticence on our part, leave a tarnish on the reputation of an honest man. You see, gentlemen," he added, bitterly, "I have become suddenly virtuous—which perhaps astonishes you—and new converts are apt to be exaggerated in their enthusiasm. However, I have said all I wish to say—go on with the settlement of that business. I believe you have prepared the draft of the Kensington mortgage. As soon as you can get it engrossed I will execute the deed. And leave no stone unturned, I beg of you, to solve the fate of George Barton. I must wish you good-day."

As he turned his back to go to the door the two partners, whose faces were vividly pale and troubled, exchanged a glance.

"But, my lord," said the senior, who stood nervously passing his hands over each other in the invisible soap-washing manner, "supposing it should—unhappily—turn out—that the individual—who—who came to so untimely an end in the Circus was Mr. Barton, what would your lordship—ah—feel it to be our duty to do?"

"In that case," replied the earl, suddenly turning round—he had been listening to the speaker half over his shoulder—and fixing his strange, inscrutable, but most scrutinizing glance on Mr. Pollard, "I should authorize the chief commissioner to offer in my name a reward of £2,000 for the discovery of the murderer; for to suppose George Barton to be going about London with a pot of nitroglycerine or a dynamite cartridge in his pocket, when he was never known to handle a gun because of his horror of gunpowder, is as incredible as to suppose he is hiding in the moon."

The way out of the sanctum led through an outer office in which a number of clerks were at work. Mr. Charles Pollard accompanied the earl to the door, showing him an exaggerated politeness, and affecting to exchange with him familiar observations about the state of the crops. This little by-play, intended to impress his clerks with his importance, was unfortunately not so effective as he supposed, having long been seen through by those acute and irreverent observers.

"There is 'Charlie,' putting on all the side he can with old Selby," whispered a sucking attorney in articles to an old clerk at his side, who was drafting a statement of case for counsel.

The other nodded with a subdued smile, but did not reply. He had been thirty years sitting at the same desk, and during that period had had time to reflect on the golden virtue of silence. But he was none the less observant. His sharp eye had taken in the expression on the earl's face, and on that of Mr. Charles, as they emerged from that inner room facetiously termed "the dock," among the minor clerks; his trained ear had caught some false notes in his employer's voice. As the latter passed again on his return, this curious person managed to glance at him, unnoticed, from under his shaggy eyebrows. He saw a strange pallor in his face, and marked the drawn-down corners of his smooth-shaven lips.

"There is certainly something queer in the wind about this Bar-

ton business," was the old man's reflection, but he did not make any of his companions a party to his thoughts. A moment after, the door behind which Charles Pollard had vanished opened again, and his head reappeared.

"Mr. Grayson?"

The old man started, rose, and entered the room. Both the partners were there.

"Shut the door, Mr. Grayson. You are our oldest clerk, Mr. Grayson, and we are going to give you a proof of our confidence in your discretion. Lord Selby has just gone out. You know him well. He has dismissed his hansom and is walking along the south side of the fields in the direction of Lincoln's Inn. It is important for us to know where he is going to. Take this brief, which will serve as an excuse for your going out, to Mr. Huxtable's chambers. Do not leave the earl till you see him inside some door, and take a note of it. Take a hansom if it should be necessary to follow him up—here is ten shillings. Be cautious, please, and don't return without the information, and, understand again, this is strictly secret service."

When the clerk had gone out the two solicitors threw themselves into their chairs and looked at each other. Mr. Joseph Pollard was a naturally perspiring man; Mr. Charles's thin frame and substance did not lend itself to melting moods, but there was a damp secretion on either brow, and their shirts were clinging to their skin as if they had had a tough pull against the stream. And so they had. It had rather overcome them; neither of them spoke for a while. The least thoughtful spoke first.

"Well," he said, "did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"I confess I'm astonished!" said the other. "I can't understand what has come over him. He is no longer the same man. He seemed the other day, at the first blush, rather relieved than otherwise by Barton's—hem!—disappearance, but, Charlie, I tell you his present frame of mind is—dangerous."

Mr. Pollard emphasized this by clicking his lips together in a manner he had when he wished to be decided.

They were silent again for a few seconds.

"We did all we could, I think?" said Mr. Charles.

"Everything. But he ran away from us the first moment," said Mr. Joseph.

"Uncle Joseph, I never saw you more masterly—that explanation about the papers was worthy of a diplomat—quite *à la Talleyrong.*"

"I only wish it were true," sighed Uncle Joseph. "I tell you, Charlie, it's no use concealing it; things look pretty serious. This disclosure of the receipt to young Barton looks blue. Supposing the old man had told him everything?"

"Oh, surely he couldn't have done that!" cried the more vivacious partner, with a start, and a look of terror in his face.

"We never know what to expect in this world!" said the other, with a groan. "I tell you, Charlie, until we can satisfy ourselves to the contrary, we must act upon the assumption that he did. We must be ready for anything. Is that yacht arranged for?"

"Everything settled—bought in the name of Yates—you know that confidential friend of mine. She is lying off Gravesend, ready

to get up steam any moment, and the crew can be relied on for many reasons."

* * * * * * *

The earl walked along with his usual stately deliberation. He passed through Lincoln's Inn, down Chancery Lane, and through the gate-way of the Middle Temple. In King's Bench Walk he examined the names which, like creeping plants, cover the walls of the grimy entrances with a deciduous growth. At length he selected a staircase, and leisurely mounted. Grayson cautiously followed, and saw him, after knocking for some time, admitted into the chambers on the top floor, on the door of which was inscribed the name of "Mr. George Barton."

Before he returned and gave his report, the partners were busily engaged in their ordinary affairs. On hearing the news the two lawyers exchanged a glance of consternation, of which Mr. Grayson took a quiet mental note.

CHAPTER VII.

A HORRIBLE SUSPICION.

NOTHING could have been more unwelcome to George Barton the younger than the apparition of the Earl of Selby at the door of his chambers. He was so taken aback by it that, although he had sworn to himself that he would control his feelings, would play a profound game, conceal his suspicions and pursue the end he had in view in such a manner as not to give any inkling of his object, he was unable for the moment to hide his surprise and trouble.

The earl read his face correctly, but took no outward notice. He put out his hand, with an air of mingled seriousness and affability, and walked into the antechamber with the assurance of a welcome friend.

"Are you alone?" he inquired, glancing rapidly around, as if to interrogate the walls and doors.

"I—I am quite alone, my lord," replied young Barton, coldly. "May I ask your lordship to come into my room?"

The earl entered the room, while Barton shut the outer door, and the latter, following his visitor, said suddenly, in a voice which quivered with emotion, while he pointed to an empty chair drawn up at a table standing near the window,

"My lord, it was there, sitting in that chair, that I last saw my father!"

The peer, who had been about to take that chair, for the reason that it would enable him to sit with his back to the light, and thus to watch the young man's face, for he had come to have a serious and critical interview with him, started, turned away, and sunk into an arm-chair that happened to be near. George Barton's eyes were fixed upon him with a curious expression, but, though a slight flush passed over the earl's cheek, his face showed nothing but pain and sympathy, and his eyes steadily returned the young man's gaze. It is one of the penalties of being an accomplished cynic that one's gravest and most sincere moments of effusion are those which others

are the least inclined to believe in. Barton assumed that the earl was acting, and admitted himself that he did it to perfection.

"I can imagine your sorrow and desolation, George," he said, gently, "and, believe me, I sympathize with you. My own anxieties are not small, and they have even become critical since your father's disappearance. I am quite thrown off my balance. In my trouble and surprise at seeing you this morning, I must have seemed hard and unsympathetic. I feel sensible of it, and hence my visit, which I trust you will not take as ill-timed and unwelcome. It is important for both of us that we should understand and, if possible, help each other. We must have an explanation—the sooner the better."

"Quite so, my lord," said George Barton, dryly.

He was standing with one hand on the table, on which he leaned nervously.

"Do you think you could bear it now?" said the earl. "You look troubled and fatigued. I do not wonder at it."

"My lord, I have not slept since I saw you on Thursday evening last. You did not do me the honor to make any communication to me after that brief and unsatisfactory interview."

"True; and I owe you an explanation for that. For reasons with which you are acquainted nothing could have been more vexatious or embarrassing for me than your father's disappearance at this crisis. My first act was naturally to place myself in communication with Messrs. Pollard & Pollard, and, as I told you this morning, I was of necessity obliged to put myself completely in their hands."

"I know, my lord, that that would be a course almost imposed upon you by the circumstances in which you are placed, and by the relations existing between you and those gentlemen. But, my lord, forgive me for reminding you that my father had been your faithful friend and servant for nearly a quarter of a century. Was not his memory—was not his family, entitled to your generous consideration? My father's character and his services to your lordship deserved at least that you should not accept, without clear evidence, the suggestion of persons who were necessarily biased against him, and who were interested in influencing your lordship's mind—I may say in poisoning your lordship's mind—with misrepresentations. My father, I venture to say, deserved at your hands a considerable sacrifice even of your feelings, for he was employed, at the very moment when he disappeared so mysteriously, in endeavoring to extricate you from a position of delicacy and embarrassment into which those very persons whose advice you have now taken—to whose representations you have been lending an ear—had brought you."

"This is all so true, George Barton," said the earl, calmly, "that it only expresses the very sentiments which I had resolved to communicate to you. I was completely upset—I hardly knew what to do—by the grave situation in which these events placed me. Your father's absence—Tilbury's accident—my own anxieties—have really rendered me incapable of judging and acting with the candor and justice which you had a right to expect of me."

"I can well understand that, my lord," said George Barton, with a sarcastic curl of the lips.

"Do not imagine," said the earl, "that you have been forgotten, or that we have not all of us felt pained by the strange and incredible theories to which we seemed to be driven in order to account for your father's conduct. Your name has been often on my children's lips. I am sure Lady Blanche and Charles, your early playmates, both sympathize with you sincerely. Lord Charles would have been to see you, had I not felt obliged, by the advice I had received, to forbid it; but they have not ceased to ask after you, for you know the regard they feel for you."

Barton's eyelids fell, his cheek glowed, his heart throbbed with a pleasurable feeling. Then he checked himself. Were these last words the outcome of candor or of diplomacy? Was this a Mephistophelean whisper, or a flash of real kindness? Spite of the horrible suspicions George Barton was nursing against the earl, these simple words, for some subtle reason, acted like a soothing balm to the irritation of the young man's feelings. For a moment or two he yielded to the sweet consolation they afforded him. But suddenly he glanced doubtfully at the peer, became pale and somber again, and said coldly, though with a courteous and respectful air,

"I thank you very much, my lord, for taking the trouble to call and express yourself so kindly. I am particularly grateful for the sympathy of Lady Blanche and Lord Charles, if you will allow me to acknowledge it to them through you. Considering the suspicions as to the reason for my father's disappearance which you owned to this morning, I could hardly have expected to have been received otherwise than you did receive me, unjust as those suspicions were. I can understand how deeply you are annoyed by his absence, for I know the crisis in your affairs to be an acute one."

"True," replied the earl, "but I do not wish you to suppose that I am thinking wholly of my own troubles, serious as they are. I was quite upset this morning by the suggestion you threw out concerning your father's fate. It seemed so incredible and so horrible."

"My lord, I am convinced it is correct." Barton spoke with a dry, defiant emphasis.

"Well, you never were a visionary; you generally measure your words and speak with reason. I can only say to you what I have just said in effect to Pollard & Pollard. If you can only show me that there is reasonable ground for your conviction, I will offer £2000 reward for the elucidation of the mystery—for a greater or more fearful mystery was never presented to human being—and whatever may be the consequences to me, I pledge myself to do everything I can to assist in its solution."

George Barton looked for a moment irresolutely at the earl, as if he fain would have believed his words to be sincere. He said, calmly and sarcastically,

"My lord, a reward has been already offered in your lordship's name. You did not mention to me this morning that an advertisement had appeared with your sanction, which was a cruel and infamous reflection on my father."

His eye and voice pointed the words. The earl did not appear to notice the young man's manner, though in reality he was deeply wounded by it. He was there to conciliate him at any cost to his

pride, and he governed himself accordingly, still waving the olive-branch.

"Why, Barton, the advertisement of which you speak only came to my knowledge an hour ago, during my interview with Pollard & Pollard. Not only had I not been consulted about it, but I expressed my displeasure at its insertion in the strongest terms."

"I beg your lordship's pardon, if I have made a mistake. It was a natural one. It was hardly possible for me to suppose that, under all the circumstances which are known to me, there was not a perfect accord between your lordship and Pollard & Pollard." Young Barton's tone was bitterly sarcastic.

This pricked the earl to the quick. It reminded him that the young man was in possession of the perilous and inglorious secret of his wrong-doing. It seemed to warn him, already hunted and worried beyond endurance, that he was in the hands of this young, inexperienced, and angry youth.

"Those circumstances, sir," he said, carried away by an anger which he could not control, "came to your knowledge through your father's bad faith, and it is a perfectly unjustifiable and gratuitous insult to throw them in my teeth in the manner you have done. What does this mean? Do you wish to use the knowledge you have thus obtained for your own advantage? If so, George Barton, what is your price? What can I give you for your silence?"

"You can give me back my father, Lord Selby—or, failing that, you can help me discover his murderers—for murdered he has been by the foulest means; and I tell you the only persons who could possibly have any motives for injuring him or putting him out of the way were those who thought that he was the solitary confidant of the secrets of their shame and criminality!"

The young man had risen, and seemed by his gesture, as he threw forward his right hand, to be casting his words in the teeth of the earl.

The peer also jumped to his feet, his face white with passion, his eyes flashing, his lips quivering, his hands clinched. But suddenly his expression changed, the flame went down, he staggered, and fell back helplessly in the chair. His chin sunk on his breast.

"Good God!" he murmured, "the boy thinks me a murderer!"

Tears shot from his eyes like rain; but for that relief he must have fallen to the floor as if struck by a thunder-bolt. His trembling hands sought to hide them, for the consciousness of weeping there, before the young man, filled his proud spirit with shame and anguish.

George Barton stood astounded at the effect of his own words. The man, before whom he had ever bowed with reverence and a sense of inferiority, was there half-prostrate before him, struck down by his accusation. Terrified at the emotion which he had produced, he was too agitated to attempt to make any analysis of the causes of the earl's extraordinary collapse. Was it guilt? Was it the horror of innocence at the foulness of the charge? Was it acting? George did not ask himself these questions. A sudden revulsion of pity and regret swept away in a moment all the feelings which had prompted his cruel speech—his more implacable gesture. In any case he felt how wrong he had been to allow him

self to be betrayed out of the self-possession he had resolutely sworn to maintain until suspicions had been converted into certainties. Nevertheless, he stood there silent, puzzled, troubled, gazing at the earl, and not knowing what to say.

As for the earl—what were the emotions that had given so sudden a shock to the moral and physical equilibrium of this man of fastidious and imperturbable cynicism, which had unsealed fountains of feeling, the very existence of which he had himself forgotten, so long had they been dried up? If he were innocent, would not honest wrath and indignation have been the ruling emotions of the moment? Were he guilty, would that involuntary cry of anguish and surprise have escaped his lips? But this strange admixture of weakness and revolt, of wounded pride and passionate sorrow, was quite incomprehensible.

There were a thousand motives pressing George Barton to interpret the earl's emotion frankly and generously—early associations, grateful remembrances of kindnesses that went back to the first notes registered by childish sense on the tablets of memory, affection for the earl's dead wife and his living family, his own personal interest. As we have seen, his father had always expected him to succeed to the position he held in the earl's establishment, that of the supreme agent or man of affairs of a colossal estate, but the young man's own ambitions flew at higher game. He would have sacrificed those ambitions to his father's wishes, which for him had almost the sacredness of a divine prescription—for, in his family, the pure and noble character and life of the elder Barton had evoked the reverence and devotion of a cult, while his solid intelligence, fine human sympathy, gentleness and warmth of heart, had drawn his wife and children to him in bonds of the closest affection. Therefore the son never contravened his father's decision, and Lord Selby had almost allowed it to be taken for granted that he would transmit to the son, should he prove himself worthy of it, the trust and regard he had in and for the father. Then there was another, a deep and secret feeling, at which we have hinted, which made it almost impossible for George Barton the younger, in this awful crisis of his life, to arm himself with the firmness and implacability of a Spartan revenge.

One of the brightest recollections of his younger days was the image of a lovely little fairy, always dressed in gay, coquettish costumes, ever vivacious, sparkling, mischievous, and yet full of infantile dignity, chattering French in delicious accents with a gracious *bonne*, and filling the vaulted halls of the grand castle of Selby with the echoes of an exquisite folly and gayety; and later on, as she developed from girlhood to womanhood, discovering charms more luminous and enchanting from day to day, like the waxing of the moon in the month of harvest. Ay! he had watched her, watched her long before he began to know or to suspect the secret of that spell which love and fate were so irresistibly weaving around him, and which was to carry in its silken web the issues of his life. The footing on which Mr. Barton's children were admitted to the freedom of Selby Castle was sufficiently familiar, but of course could not deceive or mislead them as to the exact nature of their relations to their patrons. The intimacy which grew up especially between

young George Barton and Lord Charles Layton, and incidentally with Lady Blanche, was regarded, or rather was disregarded, by the earl with that stately indifference to any of the consequences likely to flow from such an intimacy which was natural to a man who knew that there were not a dozen families in England able fairly to pretend to an equality with his, and who had the confidence that none of his children would forfeit or compromise their aristocratic supremacy. On the other hand, the elder Barton's good sense, and the admirable qualities of his wife, a woman of rare culture and manners, was a sufficient guarantee that the familiarity of the relations between the castle and the manor-house would always be tempered on both sides with a due regard of the conventional lines which birth and fortune had drawn between them. But for George Barton, living within the fairy circle of fascination surrounding a beautiful girl, who treated him with mingled frankness and reserve, the situation was one perilous to the peace of his soul. The sweet and fatal influences slowly, surely wrapped themselves around his heart, until he found it impossible to shake them off.

Lady Blanche was a girl of precocious intellect, and just at the time when the blossoms of the mind were forming, rich with promise of attractive fruit, the Countess of Selby died. The young girl had spent much of the time after that great loss with her aunt, the Countess of Tilbury; but she was always at Selby when her father came down, and there were abundant opportunities of intercourse between the clever, captivating beauty and George Barton, whose heart was capable of a great passion, and whose mind was developing into one of exceptional fineness and power. Lady Blanche, with her quick appreciations, could not fail to be struck by George's superiority to other young men, his gentle gravity, the distinction and originality of his conversation. Contrasting him with the chums who were brought to the castle from Eton and Oxford by Lord Layton or Lord Charles, for shooting or hunting, or on the pretense of reading parties, which degenerated into much healthy exercise and much unhealthy eating, drinking, and smoking, she was forced to take note of his advantages. Among these young aristocrats, as among the older and more distinguished guests who in the autumn filled the great castle with brilliant life, George Barton was always a striking and welcome figure. Old judges predicted for him a distinguished career at the bar, and old statesmen congratulated the earl on a godson who would shine in political life, if he ever had the chance.

The young man, trained by his clever and ambitious mother, knew exactly how to hit the mean between fawning adulation and rude presumption. He preserved his self-respect while forcing regard. Though his mental superiority was eminent, he knew how to avoid imposing it on his young associates, and in their sports he showed equal enthusiasm and address with those who gave their minds to nothing else except the development of their bodies. Hence, so far as manners and appearance were concerned, there was little besides his name to distinguish him from the aristocratic company which surrounded him, whereas he stood out clearly from among them all by the solidity as well as the brilliancy of his culture. His father had sent him to Cambridge. He was third in the list of wranglers,

and first in the classical tripos. No wonder that Mr. Le Breton exclaimed against the idea of making such a youth the agent of a peer.

But the elder Barton had a horror of ambition. He had seen it conduct to so many shipwrecks. Whatever his ultimate intentions were, he did not encourage his son to look beyond the moderate but honorable station in which he had found for himself an unalloyed comfort and happiness. So the old gentleman wanted to article his son to a solicitor. George's ambition was pressing him to aim at something higher, but he resolved that he would carry out the paternal wishes at any sacrifice. Probably it was with a somewhat unconscious hypocrisy that he argued with his father that the education of a barrister would fit him as well for the coveted post as that of a solicitor. The elder Barton was not without a touch of humor. He said,

"For every guinea earned by a barrister a solicitor gets at least ten six and-eight-pences. You are a wrangler and you can calculate whether ten times six-and-two-thirds is greater than twenty-one. However, for a position such as mine, where there are no bills of cost to render, and all that is required is a good head for business and a sterling integrity, I don't think it matters which profession you belong to. And then if, after all, you should turn out to be a genius, which no Barton that I ever heard of ever did yet, you may be able to look higher. You shall read with Le Breton."

There may have been, after all, a profounder sagacity and a more real ambition in Mr. Barton's mind than he allowed to appear in desiring to place his son in the position of confidential adviser and manager for the earl. He may have thought that this was the surest way to bring to the notice of one of the astutest men in England, and of keeping under that notice, in exceptionally favorable circumstances, the great abilities of his son. The earl was a keen politician. Young Barton's views, like his father's, leaned to Conservatism, and the agent of the Earl of Selby had many opportunities, if he chose to use them, of playing even a brilliant part in county politics. Old Mr. Barton, not being a brilliant man, had to be content to act as a shrewd and active organizer, but George might, with his powers, take a more prominent and showy part. Mr. Barton, however, was one of those extraordinary men who can think for years over a subject and never allow a sign to pass his lips.

When he had placed him in Le Breton's chambers, through which, for thirty years, had been passing a vast number of those chickens of the bar who afterward became champion birds and cocks of the legal walk, Le Breton, after a few months, told his friend,

"Barton, your son is not cut out for an agent. He is no mere hard-working lawyer. If you meant him only for that, you had no business to make him a wrangler. He combines a poetic temperament with great practical intelligence. He is a man of culture and a man of the world, as well as a keen reasoner and a thorough man of business. I don't tell him so, mind. God forbid that I should do anything to thwart your wishes and prevent him from settling down at Manor Calham with twelve or fifteen hundred a year—I

dare say?—and unlimited shooting, which I know you prize so much! But really he is fit for better things than that."

"We shall see,' said Mr. Barton, shutting his lips.

But he never had the chance of resolving the question, and that is the worst of long-headed people. They look so very far ahead that they sometimes die before the journey is half finished.

This is a long digression, I must admit, in order to enable the reader to appreciate the feelings with which young George Barton stood gazing, with troubled eyes, at the peer, on whom his speech had produced such a tragical effect. But these explanations must have come in somewhere, and just here they have the advantage of filling up the time necessary to allow the earl to recover from his emotion. Gradually a conviction began to penetrate into Barton's mind that his emotion was sincere. Indeed, his heart leaned all that way. But the past few days and nights with their horrible experiences, their powerful wrestlings of mind and heart, their hours of sorrow, their episodes of vindictive passion, had not left George Barton as he was—generous, confiding, hopeful, young. He had matured more in those desolate hours than he had in years of his previous life. For in the hot-beds of sorrow and passion the soul takes on a quick and morbid growth. His faith in men was forever shaken, his belief in the victory of truth and virtue was rudely undermined, and the natural gentleness of his nature had given way to a fierce and dogged determination of vengeance.

The earl spoke first. He had somewhat recovered himself, but he kept his eyes fixed gloomily on the floor, his chin still lay upon his breast, his hands resting helplessly on the arms of the chair.

"I deserve it!" he said, in a hollow voice; "I deserve the outrage and shame of this foul suspicion, for having once allowed myself to be the accomplice of a dishonorable act. But it is hard to bear. I thought I should have fallen dead."

He put his hand to his heart, and then, as if reassured as to his vitality and strength, he straightened himself up, and with a composed face looked steadily at George Barton.

"Barton," he said, "you have struck the Earl of Selby the hardest and foulest blow that was ever struck at a Layton, and in their time they have had to give and take hard blows enough. For such an imputation as you have now so unjustly thrown at me my ancestors would have broken you on the wheel, or starved you to death in a dungeon. My father would have run you through with a sword. I need no such weapons. You are young—you will always regret these words, thrown in my teeth in a moment of vindictive passion. The recollection of them will punish you more than anything I could say or do—for the suspicion which prompted them is false, and has no foundation whatever except in the fancies of your disordered brain. But, you will say, being young and inexperienced, 'Why, then, this emotion?' I will tell you, and let my words sink deep into your mind. When an honorable man has once taken a false step, has once lost the golden aureole of that personal dignity and sense of integrity which not only illumines without, but emanates from an illumination within, his moral strength has departed, as Samson's went from him when he broke his vow. A few months ago such an imputation as you just now cast in my

teeth would hardly have excited my indignation. I should have treated it with pity and contempt; and yet just now you have seen me, absolutely innocent of anything most remotely justifying your frightful suspicions, crushed in a moment, almost to the earth, by this inconsiderate and horrible accusation. Why? Because at that moment there were suddenly revealed to my mind the full extent and bearing and consequences of an act of weakness committed—or shall I say permitted?—in a time of overwhelming anxiety. You say your father has confided all my secrets to you—then you know the facts. If George Barton told the story, he would emphasize, or even exaggerate, the circumstances which were extenuating."

George Barton the younger involuntarily stretched out his hands at these words, as if he would have taken the earl's between his own, but the earl repulsed him with a gesture of dignity.

"I don't wish to extenuate them. From this hour they have become to me more shocking and less excusable than ever. I allowed two vulgar rascals to entrap me into a position which was dishonorable, which would not bear the criticism of honest men, or stand the searching investigation of the law. It seems they have rendered me liable to one of the most awful suspicions that could rest upon the head of a human being. Ah! the aureole has gone—the aureole has gone forever."

His head drooped again.

"My lord," interrupted George Barton, in a thrilling voice, "forgive me! let me speak! Not so! The aureole comes back with repentance and restitution. I know now, and I see—alas! too late to have prevented me from conceiving an outrageous injustice—that your professions of a resolution to vindicate your honor at whatever cost were sincere and earnest. Do not let my deplorable blunder—my detestable suspicion—throw a shadow where none exists. I have wronged you, my lord—God forgive me!—and in wronging you, I see—I see—I have wronged the memory of my father, who, if he were here now, would be the first and most implacable judge of the folly and evil I have committed. My lord, you are right; no sword is needed for my punishment—the anguish of this moment can never be effaced from my memory. How can you possibly forgive me, or bear the sight of me again?"

"Stay," said the earl, gently, and evidently deeply moved by the cruel anguish that was painted on the young man's face. "I did not mean to increase the pain which I knew would be felt by a man of your sense and spirit who had fallen into such an error. I have forgiven you, George Barton, believe me, from the bottom of my heart. I do not forget that I myself had put the weapon in your hand. It was my criminal weakness in the past which excited and seemed to justify your suspicions, and supplied the barb to your dart. I have hardly any right to complain. Moreover, I gave the provocation by the terms in which I referred to your father. You retorted with too terrible an effect—thank God you were wrong! But now let us understand each other, for that is what I have come for. I also have had my suspicions awakened by something which has occurred since I saw you in the morning. I have just had a sudden and vivid illumination. Now that you have thrown this lurid flash upon the circumstances, I seem to see the outlines of a dreadful

possibility. Yes; you may be only half wrong. It may be true that George Barton has been a victim of the fault which I had committed. So far, some responsibility may rest upon me, an unconscious cause of a great crime. Otherwise I am, in act and intention, as innocent as my daughter Blanche or an unborn babe. And I give you my word that no considerations, family or personal, shall deter me from aiding you to unearth the real authors of this infernal plot, if it be true that George Barton has been made away with by foul means. Now I give you my hand upon it."

George took the hand which was extended to him, and bent over it trembling with a variety of emotions. The cynic and man of the world had spoken with earnestness and feeling. He had uncovered a side of his character which George had never suspected the existence of, and which perhaps he had never before exhibited to any human being. It is a peculiarity of that powerful, incomparable Anglo-Norman race, which, however Mr. John Bright and similar bigots may affect to despise it, has molded the English character in some of its noblest lines of pride and dignity and chivalry, that half its qualities will lie unsuspected and unrevealed from the cradle to the grave, unless some extraordinary event, such as happened to the earl, should involuntarily call them forth. This strange and proud reserve is unknown to any other race.

Not only were George Barton's suspicions removed, but he felt ashamed and mortified at ever having entertained them, for the earl's emotion, his suffering, his language and manner, combined to prove beyond a doubt that he had spoken with perfect sincerity. It was impossible for the young man to find words to express all that was in his heart, relieved suddenly of a horrible burden. He stood troubled and confounded.

The earl had recovered his ascendency. He said,

"It will be long before either of us can forget the pain of this incident. If you feel now that you can treat me as I am prepared to treat you, with perfect confidence, our duty is to confer together as to the steps we ought to take. There is before each of us a painful task—we must help each other. With the information you possess, and acting as my friend, you may be of infinite service to me in the critical position in which I am placed; for, if you have suspicions that there has been foul play on the part of certain persons, as regards your father, I am, unhappily, almost at their mercy; and your knowledge of the facts, aided by your intelligence and perspicacity, may enable me to neutralize the tremendous advantages which they have acquired over me. You can trust me, on my side, to do everything in my power to clear up the mystery of your father's fate, and remove every stain from his memory."

"My lord," said young Barton, "I am entirely in your hands. I would offer you not merely a reparation, but, if you will allow me—even after what has occurred—to revert to my relation as your godson, I humbly tender the services of affection. I believe I have some very serious information, quite unknown to you, for my father had not seen you for some days, during which matters of the gravest character came to his knowledge."

"In my business?"

"Yes, my lord—things almost incredible. The bearing of these

things on the subject of our anxiety, now that I have to consider them from a fresh point of view, will be materially altered. If you will give me time to collect my thoughts after this trying interview, I shall be able to lay these new facts before you, and express an opinion upon the effect they are likely to have on your position. As there is no time to be lost, may I call in Portman Square this evening?"

"Certainly," said the earl, "though I have received Her Majesty's commands to a Queen's ball to-night. Business, however, of this kind almost supersedes loyalty, and I shall take the same liberty that Her Majesty does, and stay away. I shall be alone at nine o'clock, and remember, George, by-gones are by-gones, and we meet then, as of old, good friends."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHICH SUPPLIES A KEY TO MORE POSITIONS THAN ONE.

At nine o'clock, when George Barton presented himself at the mansion in Portman Square, he was informed that the Earl of Selby was awaiting him in the library. Young Barton could not look again without emotion upon the familiar face of old Beesley, the porter, and the well-known features of the interior, with their mixture of comfort and grandeur. The wide hall, after running for some distance as a broad, handsome corridor, opened into a large square, which rose to a cupola in the roof of the mansion, and by the walls of which a grand staircase conducted to the drawing-room floor and upper stories. On the right of the entrance hall was a morning-room. He knew it well. It was the favorite retreat of Lady Blanche Layton. Her piano was there, and her easel, her *escritoire*, her books her great cage of birds. The room had been her mother's domestic headquarters—it was haunted with memories of her. There was not a corner which did not betray the taste of an artistic and thoughtful woman, the touch of a delicate feminine hand. The great dining-room was on the left. The library, where the earl was waiting, was at the back of the house on the first floor. As Barton was following the footman along the marble-paved hall, preoccupied with the grave subjects of the interview he was about to have with the earl, the door of the morning-room opened—a great mahogany door with crystal handles—and in the light which flooded from within the large oblong space thus cut out, as it were, in the gloomy wall appeared a beautiful young woman, while a voice, soft, clear, and melodious, said,

"Mr. Barton!"

Young Barton started and turned round, and his eyes fell on a figure in such strong and brilliant contrast with his melancholy gloom as to have all the effect which is attributed in Roman hagiography to the vision of a saint or an angel. This one, however, was not arrayed in celestial costume, though it seemed to Barton's eye to be shining as the day. On the contrary, her dress exhibited all the diabolic skill of the wicked Parisian artist in clothes. She wore a ball-dress of white satin and lace, with a crimson bodice,

subdued by a covering of white and gold web of the finest texture, a touch of crimson here and there in the train. Out of the fine, delicately-shaped corsage, like a white rosebud from its petal, rose her exquisite bust and shoulders, thrown into dazzling relief by the light coming from behind her. Her abundant dark hair was coiffed with a glittering spray of diamonds. This worldly-angelic apparition was looking at him with large lustrous eyes which were beaming with a gentle sympathy.

"Lady Blanche!" he exclaimed, in a deep, delighted tone, as he took a step toward her, "I did not expect to see you!"

She held out her right hand, which was ungloved, with a charming gesture of mingled frankness and dignity, and for just an instant gave his burning fingers a pressure which conveyed a magnetic current of sympathy. She appeared more lovely than ever, now that he was close to her, and could examine the fresh young face, a little paler and thinner perhaps, from the season's excitement and fatigues, than it had been when he had last seen her, before the ingenuousness of girlhood had felt the contact of cynical worldliness, selfish passions, and intriguing social ambitions—but he thought she looked all the more charming and spiritual for that. She had developed—she was a woman—and as her whole aspect and carriage showed, a woman of rare character and power. Not that her beauty was artistically perfect, although in looking at the *ensemble*, it would have been hard for the æsthetic experts to say what they would have had changed. A clear, high, open forehead, with delicate temples, dark, finely-arched eyebrows, eyes deep violet and lustrous, a little prominent, beneath which just now a slight weariness or anxiety had tinted the fair skin with a shade of violet, as if the color had escaped from the crystal fountains above. Her nose was straight, like her father's, with a clear, fine profile, and exquisitely curled and chiseled nostrils, with indefinable characteristics of force and pride; full lips, well-formed and ruddy, within which, when she smiled, the faultless enamel of small regular teeth shone white and healthy, while her chin was full, round, dimpled—the dimple throwing a certain naïve grace into the grave proportions of the lower face. It was, on the whole, a face rather of intellectual than physical beauty, but its charm, in movement or repose, was simply intense. Barton had never seen her in full evening dress before; he was startled and thrilled by the splendor of her white shoulders and finely-shaped arms, and the exquisite mold of her neck and bosom.

For a moment he stood gazing at her with an inadvertent expression of half-wonder, half-worship. No woman is unconscious of the effect produced by her charms, and Lady Blanche was as quick and keen an observer as her father.

"I am dressed for the queen's ball," she said, simply, casting a glance down over her figure, "and I am going first to Lady Partington's, but I wanted to see you just a moment, so I have dressed early. Oh, Mr. Barton, I am so sorry for you! You don't know how sorry I am!"

With a quick, half-involuntary movement she put out her hand toward him, as if to emphasize her words.

He hardly knew what he was doing. He seized the little hand and pressed it to his lips. The act would have been daring in a

prince, and what it was in the son of Earl Selby's late agent, defies an estimate.

She snatched away her hand quickly; a flash of feeling passed across her face which it was impossible to define. She was conscious, among other facts, that at the foot of the stairs stood six feet of curiosity and garrulity, majestically pretending to be engaged in studying the fair proportions of its silk-enveloped leg, but keenly following every word and movement; and then this was an unheard of liberty. But Barton stood before her in an attitude that was not undignified, though it seemed to imply surprise at his own audacity, and supplication for pardon could be read in his dark, expressive eyes. The flame that had shot for a second from under the long lashes of the lady was, however, quickly subdued.

"I wanted to tell you that, Mr. Barton," she said, her voice and manner altering to reserve, as she drew back slightly, though he, on his part, sharply watching, had detected a flush which, like a touch of rosy down, flitted over her neck and face—"I was afraid you would think we had all forgotten you, but I assure you both Charlie and I have felt the deepest sympathy with you in this terrible trial."

"I can not tell you, Lady Blanche," responded George Barton, in a tremulous voice, "how grateful to me your words are. I have, indeed, been dreadfully lonely and deserted. Please tell Lord Charles how much I thank him. I—I don't know how to express my thanks to you, Lady Blanche."

"Oh, I think you have been able to convey them to me, Mr. Barton," she replied, in a tone which was slightly severe and malicious. "But I must not keep you. The earl is waiting for you in the library. God help you to bear this dreadful sorrow. Good-night!"

Once more he held that lovely little hand in his for a second; once more he felt the glance of her beautiful eyes fixed upon him with tender interest and pity; and then she retired into the room, and Barton, turning toward the staircase, experienced the sensation of having suddenly walked into darkness. He took two or three steps, and only came to himself when the tall footman said:

"This way, if you please, Mr. Barton."

The man spoke gently, and somehow his tone was penetrated with sympathy. Now and then the hearts of these rude observers of the dramas of great houses—and what strange things they see and hear! —are touched by the little idyllic scenes of sentiment which pass beneath their eyes.

"Thank you, Colston," said George Barton, simply. He knew all the servants, and was a favorite among them. "I am in great trouble, Colston, and sometimes hardly know what I am doing."

Colston made the sage internal reflection that Master George seemed to have known what he was doing well enough when he kissed my young lady's hand, but he said,

"I know, Mr. George, and we all feels for you very much."

His tone was low, and it seemed as if emotion of some rare order had incapacitated him from producing anything more than this feeble remark, for he hastened the long stride of his sturdy leg to avoid Barton's eye.

To this little word of the young gentleman's, uttered with no diplomatic object, he probably owed it that the particulars of his interview with Lady Blanche were not retailed that evening by Colston, one of the earl's favorite servants, and a man otherwise of a brave disposition, for the amusement of the servants' hall.

But now, as George Barton mounted the staircase, he felt a new life throbbing in his heart, and sending a fresh energy through his frame. He marched with a firmer step. The sight of Lady Blanche had been a vision of the Angel of Hope in her brightest and most promising colors.

When he entered the library he found the earl sitting gloomily in a great arm-chair, with his head resting on his hand. He did not rise, but by a familiar gesture motioned to another easy-chair which was near him, and said,

"I am glad to see you, Barton, for my own sake, but I have some melancholy news for you. Your presentiments were, I am sorry to say, only too correct. Tilbury has come to himself; he is not out of danger, but he is able to speak. One of the first things he said to the countess was 'Barton'! He seemed to have some horrible impression on his mind, though he is unable to define the cause of it. The last thing he remembers is seeing poor Barton directly in front of his horse. That is all he recollects, and they have not told him anything more. He is quite unconscious of what followed— Ah! forgive me; I have been too precipitate in telling you of this."

George had sunk back in the chair, and was gazing at the earl with startled and haggard eyes. At length there was no doubt— the convictions to which his instinct had carried him were confirmed. Yet there is always some incertitude, some vague hope, which lingers subtle and unsuspected under the most confident deductions from circumstantial evidence. A moment before Barton would have maintained the certainty that his father was the man who had met his death in the Circus—he had affirmed it in the morning—and yet, now that the statement of the Earl of Tilbury put it beyond all question, the news fell upon the son's heart like a fresh blow. Yes, his father was dead—had died in the most horrible manner—was the subject of the sensational mystery about which all London was talking and speculating, and George Barton's brain seemed to be whirling round like a broken watch-spring; his hands grew cold, the sweat stood in great drops on his forehead. The bright vision was forgotten, the somber shadows of death and crime came down upon his soul, and an intolerable grief almost weighed him down to the earth.

The earl was moved by the young man's anguish. It is difficult for the most clever worldling to find the right words to say in such a moment—only a child, or a lover, can touch with soothing fingers the chords of nature which vibrate to such a crashing stroke as that. The peer was too fine a spirit not to feel his own incompetence in such a case; but he rose and said with emotion in his voice, as he took one of the cold hands which lay flaccid on the arm of the chair,

"The shock has been too great for you. Stay, let me go and get you a glass of wine."

He made a step toward the door to fetch it himself, but George stopped him.

"No, my lord, thank you," he said. "I shall recover in a moment. It seems so dreadful now that there can be no doubt about it. I will try to master my feelings."

Still, his head sunk into his hands.

The earl, nevertheless, went out of the room. He thought the young man would probably recover more readily if he were left alone for a while with his grief, so, to make a pretext for his absence, he went for some wine. He was very uncomfortable.

And then there happened one of those strange and unaccountable things which no science and no theories of supernatural government or influences can satisfactorily explain, one of those fatal incidents in which all the actors seem to be the puppets of some fantastic prestigiator, and are unconsciously entangling themselves in the net of an inextricable destiny. As the earl was directing his steps to the dining-room to seek for the wine, Lady Blanche, wrapped in a long, white mantle, came out of the morning-room, ready to enter the carriage which had been ordered round from the stables to take her to the house of the Marchioness of Wight, a cousin of the earl's, who was to be her chaperon for the evening. Her eye was quick. She read trouble and consternation in her father's face. He had not informed his children of the statement made by Lord Tilbury.

"Why, papa," she said, putting her two hands on his shoulders, and looking earnestly at him, "you look quite pale. Are you ill? What has happened? Has George Barton gone already?"

The earl, in his trouble, did not notice the familiar manner in which she had named the young man.

"No," he said. "He is not well. I was going to get him a glass of wine. He has just heard something which has affected him very painfully."

"Papa, let me go for it!" cried his daughter, throwing off her mantle on a settee which was near her, putting her arm through her father's, and drawing him into her room, a room dear and sacred to him by many memories. "Sit down there while I get it—you need something, too."

"No—give me a glass of water, and fetch some wine for him."

There was water standing on the table in a silver flagon. She brought him a glassful.

"Papa," she said, "do tell me what has happened! What is it that you have heard to trouble you so much?"

"My dear Blanche," replied the earl, who felt revived by the draught, "don't trouble yourself about it—it is very painful news—and you are going out. You had better leave us—I can manage quite well—and you will hear about it to-morrow."

"No—please, papa, I could not go away now; I should be on thorns all the night. I shall not go out to-night," she said, with decision; and she ran to the bell, which she rang with nervous force.

"Yes, yes, my dear Blanche, you must go," said the earl, earnestly. "It is most important that there should be no fuss or gossip about this affair of Barton's, and you will only make people wonder why you are absent from the palace. I entreat you not to

alter your arrangements. There is really nothing to call for your interference."

Lady Blanche had already sat down at her *escritoire,* and began to scribble a note to the marchioness.

"Well, papa," she said, stopping her pen for an instant, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll ask the marchioness to take me up here on her way from the Partingtons', and I can go to the ball all the same."

Colston entered the room.

"Colston, tell Bellamy to go with the carriage to the Marchioness of Wight's and leave this note. I shall not want the carriage again to-night; the marchioness will call for me here on her way from Portland Place to Buckingham Palace."

The earl never carried on a discussion before his servants. He was obliged to keep silent while this order was being given; besides, he knew that when his daughter had made up one mind—to wit, her own—it was of very little use trying to make up another.

"Now, papa," she said, when the footman had left the room, as she came over and planted herself in a determined attitude opposite her father, "what is this terrible news?"

"Well, you little tyrant, I suppose I may as well tell you of it at once. I mentioned that Tilbury had spoken. From the first words he uttered it seems hardly possible to doubt that the victim of that horrible business in Regent Circus was none other than Mr. Barton."

Lady Blanche clasped her hands together.

"Old Mr. Barton! How dreadful! What a terrible blow for poor George Barton! But we are forgetting him. Go up to him; I will bring you the wine myself."

She had vanished through the door before the earl could speak. He rose, and hastily mounted the staircase, anxious to see whether his visitor had recovered a little from his emotion. George Barton still sat with his head between his hands. The blood was coursing through his body with quickened impulse, his temples were throbbing; a great struggle was being fought out within his soul. The earl was absolved, wholly and clearly in Barton's mind, from any responsibility for the crime which it was now certain had been committed; but he seemed to be so inextricably involved with those at whom Barton's suspicions, now concentrated and intensified, pointed with redoubled assurance—it would be so difficult, if George Barton's idea were correct, to separate the earl from his advisers, that, when the young man reflected on the justice which he felt it to be his sacred duty to pursue, he was appalled at the perils which would hang over the head of the man in whose house he was sitting, and, consequently, of the woman for whom he had conceived a wild and hopeless passion. At all risk his father's honor should be vindicated; that was a definite decree of George Barton's conscience. He swore by no gods, and took no supernatural powers to witness; it was the calm, inflexible dictate of reason and justice that he should undertake that task, regardless of himself, of his own future, of the consequences to any one concerned. On the other hand, there were the terrible complications of the situation. The figure of the earl, his godfather, his father's friend, his own generous patron, as he had seen it that day in his chambers, rose up before him. It seemed

to plead for forbearance and mercy—mercy not only for himself, but for the base, dastardly creatures whose punishment must involve him in shame and disgrace. And then there was that vision which had only a few minutes before flashed its brightness on Barton's eyes and heart, with its voice of tender sympathy, the touch that thrilled him with a strange delight, the look which electrified his frame; how could he bear to see HER suffering the unmerited sorrows of a dishonored name and of broken fortunes? Cruel, indeed, was the struggle which was going on in the young man's mind, and of the duration of which he had been quite unconscious, while the silver clock on the mantel-piece ticked on steadily. His reflections were interrupted by the return of Lord Selby. George Barton hardly felt able to hold up his head and face to the earl, as he quietly took his seat by his side.

"I went," said the earl, gently, "to get you some wine. I met Blanche in the hall"—George trembled at the name—"and she has gone to get it for you. She is like her mother—always full of sympathy and goodness. Ah! here she comes."

The door was pushed quietly open, and Lady Blanche, a silver salver held out in both hands, on which were a flagon of water, a crystal decanter of wine, and two glasses advanced silently to the table. Her face was animated with exertion. George, at the last words of the earl, started to his feet, and a deadly pallor spread over his features.

She rapidly poured out a glass of wine, and held it out to him.

"Not that," he said, as a flush rapidly replaced the paleness in his cheek; "but I will take a glass of water, please."

He moved as if to help himself, but she forestalled him. From her hand he took the clear and brilliant goblet, and emptied it to the last drop. Each drop was an elixir.

"Do you feel better?" she said.

"Yes—Lady Blanche—thank you, ever so much?"

"The earl has told me—I can not say how grieved I am, Mr. Barton. It is really too dreadful. But you are strong—you will bear up, I am sure—for—for your mother's sake. I will leave you now, papa. Good-night!"

She did not offer him her hand this time, but her look was eloquent with sympathy and encouragement; and as George Barton hastened to the door, she gave him a little farewell bow in passing out. He saw a jeweled tear run down her cheek, and once more he was left in darkness. But now he turned to the earl with a composed manner, and spoke in a firm, strong voice:

"My lord, during the few hours that have passed since I saw you in the Temple, I have had time to go carefully through all the facts of your relations with Pollard & Pollard, which were stored up in my memory, and I have assisted it by a reference to certain notes which I made from time to time, and to some confidential letters and papers of my father's which are in my possession. Lord Tilbury's confirmation of my worst suspicions came upon me so unexpectedly that I was utterly overwhelmed, although I thought my mind was already so firmly convinced that no new evidence could have any effect on me. I suppose I must have been cherishing some unconscious doubts or hopes. You, doubtless, now agree with me

that my poor father really did perish in this awful catastrophe. I am sure you do not believe that he was himself the author of such a vulgar and sensational mystery. There is nothing left for us but to adopt the conclusion that behind this there is an infernal plot and a hideous crime."

"I am afraid," said the earl, gravely, "we are driven to that conclusion. There is no possible room to doubt it any longer. But who are the persons who could have had a motive for committing such a crime upon such a man as your father? My imagination is completely at fault. The plan of the murder is so inconceivably wild, perilous, and diabolical that I can not reconcile it with the character of the persons at whom your suspicions are evidently pointing."

"My lord," replied Barton, "you do not yet know all that my poor father had found out, and which he meant to have told you on that fatal afternoon. The situation, as you understand it, is romantic and painful enough; but when you know everything, you will cease to feel any wonder that my suspicions have fastened on those people, the only people in the world, so far as I know, with regard to whom my poor father carried in his breast a disgraceful secret. You are not yet aware what a vital interest those people had in preventing that interview between you and him from taking place, in closing his mouth forever, in causing the proofs of their criminality to disappear."

"What do you mean? another crime? something unconnected with the transaction which I have so much cause to regret?"

"Yes, my lord. The transaction you refer to may be open to very severe judgment; but alongside that which my father unearthed, and of which the two Pollards were the perpetrators, it is comparative innocence. Exposure was simply utter ruin for them, and certain consignment to a felon's fate. Remember, my lord, that—just as you did—they must have imagined that my father was the only person living acquainted with the facts of this complicated business—they could never have suspected that, by some mysterious providence, my father had intrusted to another mind—one which he regarded as almost a supplement of his own—the important secrets which were filling him with anxiety; that he had called me in to help him to unwind the intricacies and carry the responsibilities of one of the most difficult situations from which an honorable man ever had to devise an outlet."

The earl nodded gravely. He was surprised at the ease and power with which young Barton expressed himself. The consciousness was dawning on him that his godson had suddenly become, to no small extent, the master of his destiny. With feverish impatience, like one who of old consulted the oracle, this astute, experienced peer, whose word before now had influenced the destinies of nations, hung upon the lips of a youth of whom only yesterday he would have thought, if he thought of him at all, with languid or patronizing interest.

"I was going to suggest," continued George Barton, "that I should first state the facts as they are known to me, and ask you to correct or fill them up from your own knowledge. I will, at the same time, give my impressions of their bearing on your present

position and my father's fate. When we have our case clearly stated, as the lawyers say, we may consult as to the best course to be taken in your personal interest and in that of justice."

"Nothing could be better. You remind me strangely of your poor father's method of doing things—though it is no injustice to him to say that the son has learned to improve upon the father."

The color came into the young man's face at this compliment, which, from such a quarter, was no idle one; but he said, simply,

"The thoughtful son may succeed to some of the accumulated wisdom of his father, as the thoughtless one too often does to his parent's wealth. I deserve little credit if, living with such a man, I have imbibed some of his spirit. But before I go any further, I wish to discharge my mind of a matter which has, since you left me this afternoon, been weighing on it rather heavily. My lord, when I called this morning in Grosvenor Place, I intended to have had an interview with the Countess of Tilbury."

The earl started, but was silent. He had learned this from Simpson, and it had troubled him; but after the delicate explanation with young Barton, he would not himself have broached the subject.

"I ask you to forgive me the intention—which, fortunately, was defeated. My brain was disordered with grief and anxiety, and I could hardly say what I was going to tell her, or what precise object I had in view. Brooding over the business day and night, I had grown desperate. But for your frank and well-timed visit, it is hard to say what grievous misunderstandings might not have plunged us all in ruin and confusion. Thank Heaven, my lord, for the inspiration which led you to my chambers! Now I am able to offer my poor services with a clear conscience, and will do my best to help to defeat this wicked conspiracy, which was aimed as well at your credit and fortune as at my father's life. The situation has become even more serious than you suspect."

"Well," said the earl, gloomily, "I must face it as bravely as I may. For myself, I am near the end of life's tether, and I might manage to endure the penalty of wrong-doing, severe as would be the wounds to my pride and egoism. But—there are others; it would be hard to leave a soiled escutcheon to my heir, though God knows there is little chance of his maintaining its luster! And there are Blanche and Charlie—there is my sister—and poor Tilbury, who already looks upon me as a father—and with whom I had hopes of knitting a closer relationship—it would be dreadful to bring them all under the shadow of dishonor—more dreadful to feel myself dishonored in their eyes—and with such a name and after such a career as mine!"

The peer sighed heavily, not looking at his visitor, but gazing about distressfully while he spoke. George Barton's face became deadly pale as the earl unconsciously uttered the fatal words which reminded his hearer of the insuperable nature of the barrier standing between him and the fair woman who had only a few minutes before inspired him with new life. In saving the earl's reputation he would be helping to make that barrier more firm, more insurmountable than ever. For an instant a horrible thought crossed his mind, only to be dismissed with a shudder of horror and shame that

it should ever have occurred to him. The daughter of the humiliated peer would be a much more attainable object for the humble commoner than the brilliant beauty who carried in her proud dignity the untarnished coronet of the Selbys. But this was only one of those lurid flashes from the bottomless pit of evil which sometimes jerk their livid light across the mental firmament of the purest souls, and remind them that they are human—that is to say, simply a compound of good and bad. It was only a harmless dart of temptation, which strikes and glints off the polished armor of a strongly-tempered virtue. Yet for a few moments George Barton could not speak, for the earl's words had seemed to put an extinguisher on a glimmering hope.

He spoke up, however, at length, bravely:

"You will permit me to say, I trust, my lord, that I share your anxiety in regard to—to those who are so dear to you. Lord Charles has always been my friend—Tilbury is one of my most valued acquaintances—my mother's affection for Lady Blanche would be a sufficient motive to urge me to make any sacrifice to shield her from any preventable sorrow. I must do my duty to my father's memory, who is dead, and to my mother, who is living, but I hope that may be reconciled with a devotion to your interests—and those of your family—since it is clear you desire to insure immediately, and at any sacrifice, an honorable escape from your perilous situation."

"That is all I desire. I told your father to devise the means of full and prompt reparation," said the earl, who, in the trouble of his own thoughts, had not noted the agitation of Barton's manner.

"My father never doubted it. I wish his son had been as generous and experienced a friend," said the latter.

"Say no more about that, George," said the peer, kindly. "You see, for years, your father read my mind as in a glass. He was the only man, I believe, who ever thoroughly knew me—more shame to me for ever having suspected him! I opened my heart to him very freely—especially of late—since my wife's death. You might inherit his sagacity and ability, his sincerity, his candor—I think you have—but you could not succeed to his experience, to his confidence in a man whose character had been under his eyes—very keen eyes, too—for more than twenty-five years."

"Thank you, my lord. You are generous, and I shall try to show my appreciation of it. Shall I now state the facts as I understand them?"

The earl nodded, and Barton, taking out a note-book, said,

"I have jotted down here some memoranda which will assist me:

"In 187–, almost exactly eight years ago, the late Earl of Tilbury, your brother-in-law, died, leaving as sole issue a son, the present Edward, Earl of Tilbury. He left immense landed estates and a large personalty, the whole valuation of his property amounting roughly to a million and three-quarters. You, my lord, and Mr. Fairway, the banker, were appointed executors and guardians of the minor, then over thirteen years of age. Your brother-in-law was a man of great shrewdness and with a taste for speculation—not only in lands, but in finance. Shortly before he died he had purchased two estates which lay in the neighborhood of his great

Devonshire property. They were called Pelton and Eton-Marley. They cost together £550,000. He paid down of this sum £300,000, and by the agreement of purchase, the balance, namely, £250,000, was left on mortgage at 3 1-2 per cent., which charge the earl, who had calculated his resources very cleverly, arranged should fall due in 188–, that is this very year—about the time when his son would come of age. It is, I believe, in connection with the payment of this charge at its maturity that your lordship's difficulties arose."

The earl assented by a movement of the head.

"Those difficulties arose, as lawyers would say, out of the non-feasance, misfeasance, and malfeasance of Pollard & Pollard, who had been the solicitors to the testator, and whom you and Mr. Fairway had continued as solicitors to the estate."

"Yes—and who practically became its managers. I must explain to you how that arose. When Lord Tilbury died, and left me one of the executors, I felt obliged to accept the trust, although it was a very onerous one. It seemed to be the less burdensome that Fairway was my co-executor, and no abler man could have been found to take such a duty upon him. I was deeply engaged in politics, a man in society, overwhelmed with anxieties in regard to my own estate, which you know is a very large and troublesome one. It required all your father's time and energies to superintend it, and I never grudged him the £1500 to £2000 a year he got for it—for it was well earned. Fairway and I, therefore, arranged to divide the duty—he undertook to supervise Pollard & Pollard in the administration of the estate, while I agreed to take my nephew in hand, and look to his education and preparation for the high position he was to fill."

"He will do justice to your lordship's care and affection."

"He is a good fellow every way, and if he lives through this crisis I predict for him a brilliant career. I wish my eldest son were like him! But to proceed. Just as Fairway had begun to master all the details of the administration — about eight months after my brother-in-law's death—he died. It was a grievous loss to me—I was left alone with this colossal trust on my hands. However, Pollard & Pollard were an eminent firm—reputed rich, beyond suspicion, and trusted by everybody. I thought I could do nothing better than leave the entire management in their hands, endeavoring from time to time to follow up what they were doing."

"Precisely, my lord, and no blame can attach to you for trusting them, especially as you were liable for their mistakes if they made any. Nevertheless, out of this confidence sprung all your troubles, and I understand it arose in this way. The late Earl of Tilbury was intimate with some of the princes of finance in the City, and having a large ready capital always disposable, often took part in some of their combinations. Among others he had a friend in Mr. Pinxton, the eminent American banker, who, shortly before the earl's death, proposed to him to join in a large operation projected by an American group. They had fixed their eyes on a railway called the 'New York, Stockton, and Tallahassee Railroad,' which was at the moment in an insolvent condition, but which, owing to projected lines, was destined to become an important link in connecting the Atlantic States with the West. The object of the group

was to buy up all the shares in this railway, and Pinxton advised the earl to go into it. After sending his broker confidentially to New York, the earl satisfied himself that the movement was *bonâ fide* and secure. He invested £60,000 in the shares, at an average of £25 per share—the par being $250, or over £50—which gave him 2400 shares, and his calculation was that within three years they would be worth £60 a share—or, in other words, that his £60,000 would realize £144,000. This money he had intended to apply in part payment of the charges left on Pelton and Eton-Marley.

"Well, my lord, the earl's anticipation turned out strictly correct. Three years after his death the stock stood at £60—went to £65, £66, even £70; it afterward fell to £50, and rose again to £66. The earl had left directions in his will that the shares were to be held till they reached £60, and then sold. It was your duty as executor to have sold them when the opportunity arose. It was the duty of Pollard & Pollard, who had the will before them, who had the shares in their possession, and had undertaken the responsibility of managing the estate for you as executor, to have reminded you of this obligation It had escaped your attention. They never gave you the slightest inkling of the matter."

"Never—till last December, five years too late, and when the shares had fallen to £12 per share."

"They told you, I believe, that the matter had also escaped their attention?"

"Yes, certainly. I threatened to hold them responsible."

"We shall see about that directly. The effect of their—neglect?—at all events I will so term it for the present—was very serious for you. Had the shares been sold when the earl intended and directed them to be sold, namely, at £60, they would have realized nearly £150,000 five years since. The money would have been reinvested, and would have been applicable to the payment of the charge falling due in January this year on the two estates. When Pollard & Pollard suddenly sprung the matter on you the shares were down to £12, at which price they would not have realized £30,000; in other words, through their actual 'neglect'—and your constructive negligence—you were personally liable to make up to the Tilbury estate at least £110,000. In addition to that there was five years' interest, which, compounded at the end of each year, at the legal rate of five per cent., brought up your liability to nearly £185,000.* You were notified of this monstrous liability early in December. The young lord came of age in February—the £250,000 for Pelton and Eton-Marley had to be paid at the end of January. You had less than two months in which to make up this prodigious sum."

"I had exactly seven weeks. The news came upon me like a thunder-clap. I suppose your father has told you what my position was at that moment? For the third time I had had to pay Layton's turf and other debts—over £70,000. My money was locked up in the Cleveland mines and in the North Kensington estate, which your father was developing; my own expenses, as a Cabinet minis-

* The amount, calculated on the £144,000, would bring the exact total to £183,784.

ter, for three years and otherwise, had been very heavy. Your father had raised with great difficulty £100,000 in November to meet the more pressing engagements, and he had warned me that the drain must stop. He required a large floating capital for the Cleveland mines, but he said that in time, if I would give him fair play, those and the Kensington property would bring me out all right, and leave my landed estates unimpaired. He was, as usual, firm and candid, and frightened me terribly by threatening to throw up the agency unless I could manage to keep down expenses. During all the period of our relations we had never been so near a serious quarrel. And upon this came Pollards' demand for over £180,000. You can imagine my distress. I was nearly frantic. It seems ridiculous for a man with a rent-roll of seventy thousand a year to say so; but you see I have sunk over a quarter of a million in those mines, which are now—only now—beginning to pay their way, and I have paid £300,000 for Layton during the last four years. So that when this came upon me I was utterly nonplused. I did not dare to go to your father. I thought he would leave me in despair—a stupid idea, as was afterward proved."

"I believe also that Pollards objected to his intervention in the matter."

"Well, I had told them very frankly what my position was, not only generally, but in regard to him, and I see now that they took advantage of my difficulties. I suppose they did not want him to become aware of the '*laches*'—I think you call it?—of which they had been guilty."

"My lord," said George Barton, "you will see directly that the term is utterly inadequate to describe their conduct. As my knowledge of what ensued upon this is somewhat hazy and imperfect, perhaps you will have no objection to tell me, in your own words, what took place between you and Pollard & Pollard?"

"Certainly, I will do so," said the earl, getting up, and walking up and down the room to collect his thoughts.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PEER AND HIS SOLICITORS.

"BEFORE," said the earl, "I detail the incidents leading up to the transaction which has caused me so much sorrow and humiliation, let me shortly describe the condition in which I found myself when that unpleasant surprise was sprung upon me by the Pollards.

"I owed the estate £185,000, in reduction of which there were the shares, worth, at the time, say £30,000, so that I had to make up the sum of over £150,000. The Pollards, however, told me the shares were rising rapidly again, and that I had better hold them. They turned out to be correct in their judgment—to-day they are at £25, and would realize £60,000. Well, the charges on Tilbury's two estates in Devonshire, amounting to £250,000, would have to be paid at the end of January. When the Pollards informed me of the oversight, there was lying to the credit of the Tilbury estate in

the Bank of England about £180,000; they suggested that when my nephew came of age he would require to have a fair amount of ready money at his disposal, and I agreed with them that £80,000 should be left for that purpose, leaving the £100,000 available toward the payment of the mortgage. It was clear, therefore, that I must make up the other £150,000 at once, or else the mistake we had made between us would have to be disclosed to Tilbury; it might get out, and it would have been excessively unpleasant, that such a gross act of negligence should be attributed to me in dealing with such an estate as that of my brother-in-law. In fact, my *amour propre* demanded that the matter should be made right at once. I could not allow Tilbury's interests to suffer for a blunder for which I was morally and legally responsible—I could not have it said that on the day when he came of age I was a large debtor to the estate I had been administering. The Pollards, also, were anxious that the matter should be arranged because its exposure laid them open, at the very least, to an imputation of negligence. This explains what took place afterward—their feverish impatience—their desire to keep your father out of the business—and so on."

"Not entirely, my lord," said George Barton, significantly. "They had other reasons for that, of which I will tell you directly."

"At all events, that is how I look upon their action. Of course I was at my wits' end how to raise the money, especially without your father's assistance. Pollard & Pollard, however, in what I thought at the time to be a very handsome manner, told me if I would leave the matter in their hands they would raise me the money for a year or two, simply on my personal bond, and a deposit of the title-deeds of my Kensington estate. I had the deeds here in London in my safe. I had nothing to do but hand them over. I breathed more freely. I thought the matter had been arranged, for a time at least. My estates are immense, and there was no question of their being able eventually to bear this heavy strain. Even if I were called on to make a sacrifice, I should still be a rich man.

"But about ten days before the time fixed for the payment of the £250,000 to the mortgagees I received a visit from Mr. Charles Pollard, the junior member of the firm—you probably have seen him, a gentleman of rather priggish airs, and with an oily manner, but concealing under his affectation an extraordinary cunning and shrewdness.

"With a good deal of circumlocution and many professions of regret he informed me that, owing to the tightness of the money-market, the clients to whom they had looked to advance the money declined to do so on the proposed security.

"I was thunderstruck. Here they had allowed me to remain under the impression, until almost the last moment, that the matter was settled. I had not restricted them as to terms, and of course they would have charged me a heavy commission. Now they told me the money was still to find. I am afraid I was rather angry. I expressed myself somewhat freely. Mr. Charles Pollard simply grimaced, shrugged his shoulders, and said,

"'I assure your lordship we have done our best—our very best. We have left no stone unturned. We thought the matter was settled, but you see bankers are always unreliable—very skittish!

When the bank-rate goes up they draw in their horns—like snails, my lord, like snails you know; there is no getting them out of their shells.' "

The peer unconsciously imitated Mr. Charles Pollard's manner in a way that forced a smile from George Barton's grave face.

" 'Devil take your bankers, Mr. Pollard,' I said; 'I have nothing to do with bankers or bank-rates. You promised me faithfully to find the money. Why have you not done so—or at least why not let me know sooner that you couldn't?'

" 'We regret, your lordship, we are deeply grieved, your lordship, but it was quite impossible—quite. The security, you see, is not quite up to the mark. Now, if we had been able to offer a clean mortgage, for instance, of your Kensington estate—not a mere deposit of the deeds—we might have managed it—on terms—on terms, my lord. But just now—capital is skittish, capital is very skittish, my lord—like snails—everybody drawing in his horns.'

" 'You rather mix your metaphors, Mr. Charley,' I said, 'but I understand you. Well, I must have the money. I will grant a mortgage on my Kensington estate. But it is a complicated affair; there are a lot of long leases already granted to builders, and new transactions taking place every week. Only Mr. George Barton is acquainted with the details—he has the entire management of the property. I will telegraph to him to come up at once,' and I took a telegraph form to write the telegram immediately—you know I am rather prompt in my movements.

" I don't know why, but I remember I had a sort of impression that Mr. Pollard's face turned paler at that moment. He hastened to interrupt me.

" 'No, my lord, that is not advisable. If Mr. Barton is introduced into this business he must necessarily be informed of all the circumstances. Believe me, it is not your lordship's interest just now that this matter should go beyond ourselves. Then, my lord, the character of our firm is at stake in this matter. We can not conceal from ourselves that this has been a very awkward and serious oversight. Although we are advised by counsel that we are not in any way liable for the loss which has occurred, our professional reputation might be impugned—the circumstances would be misunderstood—perhaps misrepresented—even criminal suspicions excited, to which we should be very sorry to see any one in your lordship's position exposed, and—in fact, my lord—you will permit me to make an appeal to you—it is our mutual interest, I might say, your and our joint and several interest—that—just at this moment—your ward coming of age—a great event in society—the termination of one of the largest—quite colossal—administrations it has ever been our lot to conduct—your lordship's brilliant success in discharging the grave and important duties of guardian—great festivities coming on—all the galaxy of society watching the event—it is—I may suggest—our joint and several interest, that—at all events for the present—this little matter should be kept between ourselves— should lie *perdoo*.'

" 'This little matter, as you call it, Mr. Charles,' I said, 'involves about a tenth of my whole fortune, and I confess I don't see much in what you say. It will undoubtedly be very disagreeable for me

that so serious and disgraceful a neglect in the conduct of the administration should come out just as we are on the eve of my nephew's majority. Barton, however, is not the man to talk about confidential business, or try to injure your reputation. But—find the money—otherwise there is no resource. If there is to be a mortgage, Barton must settle the deeds. True, as I have told you, I would rather he knew nothing about it at this particular moment; but if you can not assist me I must send for him.'

"'My lord,' he said, hitching his chair a little forward, and leaning over toward me in a confidential manner, 'we have not been so neglectful of your lordship's interests as you imagine. We have discussed this matter—my senior partner and relative, and I—with great anxiety—and—we—have even taken action, which—subject of course to your lordship's concurrence—might—in fact, I may confidently say to your lordship, will—relieve your lordship from your present embarrassment.'

"'Oh, well!' I said, 'Mr. Pollard, that is good news; why didn't you say so at once? You would have saved me some anxiety, and the recording angel some unnecessary trouble!'

"'Well, my lord, you see it is a *durneyer resort;* but you know that we have the honor of being the legal advisers to your lordship's sister, the Countess of Tilbury.'

"'Good heavens!' I cried, 'I hope you have not said anything about this to the countess!'

"'It is not likely, my lord, that people of our experience would disclose anything of a compromising character. But in the serious emergency which has arisen, it occurred to us that, without being made *o coorong* with the actual state of affairs, our client, with whose position and ability to aid you we are professionally acquainted, might temporarily advance the money—or help us to raise it—so as to give us time to look about us—'

"I interrupted him.

"'I won't hear of it, Mr. Pollard!' I cried. 'I do not wish my sister's affairs to be mixed up with mine, in any way. You may dismiss that idea at once.'

"'Pardon me, my lord,' he said. 'If that is your lordship's last word, then I must inform you that we can not be of any further assistance to you. But your lordship has not heard yet what our proposal is. I should tell you that I have been down to Linton and have seen her ladyship, and she has expressed her readiness to carry out our suggestion, provided your lordship gives it your sanction.'

"'And what, Mr. Pollard,' said I, 'is this precious proposal?'

"'My lord, I explained the position to the countess in this way—hum—ha—in fact making, as you will observe, a very general statement of the actual facts—without entering into unnecessary details. I informed her ladyship that an unexpected call had arisen for a large sum of money to pay off charges about to become due on her son's estates—that, until certain shares were realized, the estate could not furnish the money required, except at a very great sacrifice—which—ah!—as your lordship will observe, is strictly within the truth.'

"'It would be, Mr. Pollard,' I said, 'if you added that the call

had arisen upon me, that it was I who could not furnish the money except at a great sacrifice.' So you see, Barton, I was quite alive to the moral phases of Mr. Charles Pollard's statements to my sister. However, he avoided argument on that point.

"'Forgive me, my lord,' he said; 'I will finish. I added that it might take some time to realize the shares, though eventually the whole amount needed was sure to come in—of that we can not have the slightest doubt since you, my lord, are responsible for it. I further stated that you, as executor of the estate, would become responsible for the large sum we required, if she would advance it or help us to raise it. She might give a charge on her life interest in Linton Grange—it is not a perfect security, but with her known wealth and yours together it will do—for say £50,000. Then she has £55,000 in United States bonds, which could be deposited as collateral security for a further sum of £50,000, and she has £50,000 or £60,000 on deposit at Coutts's. We ventured to put it in this way: that, as you had to incur the primary responsibility, it was only fair that she should come to your assistance. Meanwhile, of course, she would enjoy the revenues, and have interest on her money. If this could be arranged, and you would allow us to deposit along with the charge on Linton your Kensington deeds, as security for your lordship's bills or personal bond, we know a bank which will advance you the balance of cash required.'

"I was very much startled," pursued the earl, "at such a proposition as this—so clearly immoral, notwithstanding Mr. Charles Pollard's cunning way of putting it—emanating from a firm of such standing, and it ought to have put me on my guard. Indeed, I showed my feeling, and put a veto on it at once, although he held under my nose a letter from the countess assenting to the proposal, provided I wrote her a note requesting her to carry it out. I sent him away, telling him he must find some other way of raising the money. He quietly asked me to think it over for twenty-four hours, no doubt expecting that during that time the devil would have a chance at me. Alas! he was right. Instead of going to my sister and telling her the whole story, and getting her sympathy as well as her help, I allowed myself to do an act which was mean, false, and despicable. I am ashamed to say I wrote her a note, saying, 'I could advise her to act as Pollard & Pollard had recommended,' thus affecting to cheat myself by throwing the responsibility on them, and, as you know, to this hour the countess does not know the truth. The only security she has is my personal undertaking, which, it is true, is good enough, but you see the fact is this—what she supposes she has advanced to her son's estate is really advanced to me—her mortgage and bonds and money have been obtained from her on false pretenses—pretenses made to her jointly by her brother and her solicitors, both of whom are equally amenable to criminal proceedings—and equally deserving of punishment.

"I can not describe to you—you can not imagine—the torture and anguish of mind I have endured since that miserable business. It is not only that I am placed at the mercy of two vulgar accomplices, it is the degradation of my moral dignity, the blotch upon a

hitherto untarnished honor, and a gnawing sense of the baseness of my conduct.

"Still I did my best to minimize my moral culpability. I made stipulations from which I would not swerve, though the Pollards put an immense pressure on me. I insisted that the countess's money and bonds were to be handed to me, and I gave my own receipt for them. I lodged the bonds at my own bankers, obtained a loan on them and paid the money in myself to the credit of Tilbury's estate. The mortgage of my sister's interest was made out, not to a third party, but to me. I retained the deed in my own custody, executing a deed charging it over to, and engaging to hold it in trust for, the bank which advanced the money—a miserable, complicated arrangement, but the bank was a Scotch bank, and accepted it on condition I deposited my Kensington deeds as well. Thus I tried to secure my sister's property from being attached except through me.

"You know what followed. The charge on Tilbury's property was paid off. But in spite of all my efforts the administration accounts were not ready when he came of age. Pollard & Pollard excused themselves on the plea that the estates were so immense and the accounts so large and complicated that it would take months to get them all in order. Six months having passed without the accounts being even prepared, still less audited, I became anxious. Tilbury, who is a long-headed fellow, with all his affectation of *laissez aller*, also wished everything closed up, for my sake as well as his own. He had great confidence in me and in your father, and he proposed that Barton should be asked to take the matter in hand, and with the help of an accountant audit all the accounts as a matter of form. It was impossible for me to refuse. So a fortnight ago I sent for your father to London, and then, for the first time, I unburdened my mind to him of the whole business.

"Your father was terribly grieved and wounded, both by my moral weakness and my breach of confidence toward him. Nevertheless, he showed none of that priggish severity which is assumed by moralists who have never been tempted in judging of the delinquencies of others from their own eminence. He simply said that the situation must be changed immediately, and manfully set to work to find the means of doing it with the least possible sacrifice. He insisted that the countess's property should be released at any cost. He depleted the floating capital of my coal and iron mines to free the United States bonds at my bankers, and he resolved to raise a large loan, which was easily obtainable, by a mortgage of my Kensington estate, for which three years ago, Lynns, the great contractors, offered me £240,000. Then of course the sale of the Stockton Railroad shares at £25, to which they had risen, would have provided £60,000. Meantime he began a careful scrutiny of the accounts and revenues of Tilbury's estates. When I left London, only eight or nine days ago, I understood that he had nearly concluded all the arrangements for relieving me from my equivocal position with and through the Pollards, with whom he said it would be bad policy under the circumstances to come to a rupture.

"Conceive, then, Barton, of my astonishment, chagrin, and anxiety, when, on returning to town on Thursday last, expressly to

meet him, by his own appointment, he failed to put in an appearance! While I was waiting here impatiently for him the news arrived of poor Tilbury's accident, and I hurried off to Grosvenor Place. Returning here late in the evening, I found you asking for news of your father. I was half out of my mind. I could imagine no excuse for his disappearance—a man of his staid and active character—in broad daylight, in the metropolis.

"Next morning Mr. Charles Pollard called on me. He professed to know nothing of your father's disappearance, and seemed to be greatly surprised when I informed him of it. He stated that Barton had not yet handed them over the papers, as I had authorized him to do, and that therefore nothing definite was settled. Everything he said was calculated to plunge me into deeper and deeper despair."

"Ha! that was their object, my lord!" cried Barton, excitedly.

"So I begin to suspect," said the earl. "He told me the bank directors had intimated that they would call in the money. Well, with all this anxiety I had Tilbury's critical condition on my mind, and my sister's grief and trouble. I spent most of Thursday in Grosvenor Place. In the afternoon Charles Pollard came there. He said there was no doubt your father had 'levanted;' that he must have taken the United States bonds with him, and so on—that you had called, but in the circumstances they had declined to see you, and he advised me to leave everything to them, and hold no communication with you. My mental condition was such that for the time I hardly had any judgment of my own, and allowed things to drift as they would. I flatter myself I have a pretty cool head and not a very soft brain, but this sudden confluence of disasters nearly proved too much for me. Here for four days I have inwardly suffered the tortures of the damned, while I was obliged to be consoling to my poor sister, composed before my children and servants, cool and bright to every one I met. I have had to play a comedy while my heart was bleeding, and to-day—I had—even—"

The earl stopped. He could say no more, for emotion choked his voice when he recalled young Barton's dreadful suspicion. For a few minutes the scene was painful enough. Even the hardened cynic must sometimes yield to the moral forces which, with unerring and irresistible attraction, draw down on his head the consequences of wrong or ill-judged action; and the truth was that Lord Selby's cynicism was more superficial than profound. It was the toughened skin which results from exposure to the air and constant friction in society, rather than the indurated substance of a heart ossified or petrified by selfishness, pride, and ill-nature.

"My lord," Barton at length ventured to say in an agitated voice, "you said—you promised—"

"Yes—yes—I know what you would say," cried the peer; "forgive me, but, just at that moment, when I was running up the tale of my troubles—somehow—involuntarily—that came in as the climax! Believe me, I did not wish to pain or reproach you. Let it pass, and let us go on with our melancholy task; I see it is near midnight already."

From this moment, as George Barton could not but see and feel, his moral position *vis-à-vis* the earl was assured. Young as he was,

this old, experienced, and haughty worldling had made him a confession, had exhibited to him his weakness, had placed him on the footing at once of his confidant and his adviser. In such a position a strong man gains strength, a weak one only develops his feebleness. George Barton became more cool and assured; he rose to the height of the trust which the earl seemed to be disposed to place in him; he felt that a few short hours had altered their relations, and made him necessary to the man who had been so strong and was now so weak. He said,

"When my poor father was on his way to meet you on Thursday last he had in his hands the proof of far greater wickedness than any you are yet aware of. My lord, may I ask did it never occur to you that the anxiety of Pollard & Pollard to carry out that singular and complicated arrangement with the Countess of Tilbury was very suspicious?"

"Not particularly," replied the earl.

"You see," said young Barton, "the security you put up for the loan they obtained for you was a very questionable one from a lender's point of view. Deposit of title-deeds—hypothecation of Lady Tilbury's life charge to you—and your charging it over while retaining her deed—did it never strike you that they showed an undue—a feverish eagerness to get some arrangement made by hook or by crook?"

"No. Pollards never show any 'fever'—they are are too cool for that. I did not observe anything beyond a natural anxiety to help an important client, as well as to save themselves, if possible, from an exposure of their own gross carelessness."

"Well, I have to inform you that, at the very time when these people were pressing and worrying you to find that money, there ought to have been lying to the credit of the Tilbury administration, in the Bank of England, over one hundred thousand pounds more than was lying there—part of the rents and other revenues collected by Pollard & Pollard during the past five years, and never paid in to the Bank of England, but, on the contrary, misappropriated by them."

"Good God!"

"Yes; my father found it out last week. Had he seen you on that fatal afternoon he would have informed you of this monstrous and damnable fact. All the time that these scoundrels were giving you so much anxiety—pretending that it was a matter of life and death to find the money—forcing you to join them in practicing a deception on your sister—there ought to have been lying in the bank sufficient money to pay off the charges on Pelton and Eton-Marley, and to leave you free to make up at your leisure the deficiency on the American railway stocks."

"What!" shouted the earl, jumping to his feet.

"They admitted it to my father on Monday, last week."

"Admitted it! And this morning they faced me as confidently as if I had been the knave and they were the victims."

"Ah, my lord!" said George Barton, his face flushing with indignation, "they may have thought that the only person who knew it was no longer able to give evidence."

"Another hundred thousand!" groaned the earl, sinking down into his seat.

"Do not be alarmed, my lord. They paid the money with interest, altogether over £115,000, into the bank on Tuesday morning. How they raised it Heaven knows, but they are reputed to be very rich. They informed Lord Tilbury of it by a letter, in which they stated that these were back rents which had not been accounted for. The Earl of Tilbury was so astonished by the magnitude of the sum that he sent on their letter to my father. He received it on the fatal Thursday morning; he put it in his pocket to show you; it perished with him. Lord Tilbury asked him to get an explanation of it. On Tuesday afternoon they went on their knees to my father; they implored him not to divulge it—to assist them in covering up their delinquency, now that they had made restitution. Possibly he might have done so—he was a merciful man—but unfortunately for them—fatally for him, I verily believe—his suspicions had been aroused in another direction.

"You remember my father thought it advisable before he found out this new malfeasance to employ them to raise the loan on the mortgage, and moreover they had represented to him that brokers with whom they had relations could place the American railway shares at £25, which would go a long way toward relieving you from your liability. Consequently, you instructed my father to hand them over the countess's mortgage deed, which they would receive, as her solicitors, in order that it might be extinguished, and her United States bonds, which they were to return to safe-keeping at Coutts's. Neither you nor my father had then seen any ground for doubting that the firm were thoroughly solvent, and trustworthy in their accounts. This had unfortunately been done. My father showed me their receipt; I myself made a copy of the list of papers—a list which I have at the Temple, as I told you this morning. Well, my lord, my father having some business with your brokers, who were also accustomed to act for him in his small affairs, was in their office in the City, and happening to ask the price of 'Stocktons,' he mentioned that a large quantity were in the market. 'Oh, yes,' they said, 'we deal in them a good deal. Your friend Charles Pollard, the solicitor, is an immense operator in them, and has been for years. This is in strict confidence, but Mill, his broker, told us that Pollard had made a mint of money on them.' My father held his tongue. He went back to Pollards'—it was on Wednesday afternoon—and made an excuse for asking to see the packet of papers he had handed them a few days back, and also the certificates of the Stockton shares, which were among the securities in their hands. He said he wished to make out transfers. They were anxious, I suppose, to conciliate him, as they wished to induce him to keep quiet regarding the accounts. At all events they made no objections, and produced the papers. My father turned over the certificates, and saw the dates of them. The stock would have been transferred to your name as sole executor at the time when Mr. Fairway died—that is nearly seven years and a half ago. These certificates, which my father examined, were in your name as executor, and were dated only three years since."

"Oh!"

"Did you ever sign a transfer for those shares?"

"Never."

"The shares, then, had been transferred and re-transferred—in other words, some one had forged your name to the transfers—some one who, no doubt, in the meantime was speculating in those shares—some one, very likely, who had sold them out at £60 or £70, and who, three years since, bought them in for the Tilbury estate at £20 or less—and thus saddled the unfortunate executor with a loss of over £100,000. My lord, do you wonder if from this fact I draw the simple and brutal conclusion that Mr. Charles Pollard, a large speulator it seems in these shares—having, perhaps, when they were at a high figure, speculated for a fall, been caught 'short' of them —'borrowed' them from the Tilbury estate—delivered them, let us say, at 60, and, continuing to speculate, at length bought them back again at a low figure, taking care all the time not to remind you that they were in existence?"

"Why," cried the earl in the utmost indignation, "I never heard of such a thing. Such rascality—" he suddenly checked himself, a flush suffused his pale cheek, his head dropped, his voice fell— "but who am I," he said, in a low voice, "that I should cast stones at them?"

Nothing could have proved more thoroughly the true, fine temper of the earl's metal than his sensitiveness to his own fault, and the sincere anguish of his repentance. Young Barton's heart was touched with pity and admiration while he watched the candid emotions of the quondam cynic. He hastily sought to divert the peer's mind from the painful topic.

"My poor father," he continued, "told me when he came home that he had committed a great mistake. He should have said nothing about the matter; he ought to have kept his discovery, to be revealed at a later period, after he had had time to verify the facts by a reference to the transfer office of the company in New York. Unhappily, the words escaped him:

"'How is it that these certificates are dated only three years ago? Has the earl ever transferred them?'

"He told me that Mr. Charles Pollard, who alone was with him, turned red and blue, but tried to brazen it out!

"'Oh!' he replied to my father, 'the company made a new issue of certificates, and we exchanged the old ones for these.'

"Of course my father saw through that flimsy pretext. A scene followed, in which the elder Pollard, who was called in, joined. They tried to bluster it off—threatened my father with proceedings for defamation, and so on. He left them, after an agitated interview, telling them he should sift the matter to the bottom. You would have heard of it from his own lips on Thursday afternoon, had he lived to tell you of it!"

"Why, this is unheard of—terrible! They are subject to a criminal prosecution!"

"To a criminal prosecution—to be struck off the rolls—to lose the greater part of their fortune—to be dishonored and broken beyond redemption."

"But it shall be done! It shall be done! I will give you full powers. Whatever it costs me, it shall be done!"

George Barton hesitated a moment. He did not like to remind the earl again of his own compromised situation, of the disclosures that must be the inevitable consequence of a prosecution of these men. That thought was never absent from the young man's mind. It was weighing upon it like a nightmare. Justice to the dead would drag down consequences on the heads of the living—on this nobleman, become in one short day his friend—and on others, at whose sorrow and dishonor George's heart would bleed to death.

He pointed out to the Earl of Selby how precarious the position was in which he stood, and how strongly intrenched was the position of the enemy. By the elder Barton's death, the only witness besides the earl himself, who was tainted by complicity in one fraudulent transaction, was forever silenced. The receipt for the mortgages, the bonds, was destroyed. These documents were in their power. If, as the earl had said, they now denied having received them, it was clear that they meant to destroy them or keep them out of the way. Lastly, they still had the earl under their thumb; indeed, more completely than ever. They had his Kensington title-deeds, his bond for £75,000; and as solicitors for the Countess of Tilbury they could compel the earl to make restitution of the United States bonds which had disappeared.

"But," cried the earl, "with the collateral evidence which you are able to supply we can soon prove the facts!"

"That is very doubtful. Mine is only hearsay evidence. Remember, my lord, firstly, that they are under the impression that a knowledge of these facts was confined to themselves, you, and my father—and of some of the most damning facts, to my father and themselves."

"I told them this morning," said the earl, biting his lip at the recollection of the fatal mistake he had unconsciously committed, "that you were acquainted with all the facts, and had a copy of the receipt."

"That is a pity," said Barton, looking grave. "It weakens our position to let them know what our case is. However, they did not know it on Thursday, when my father was—was put out of the way. You see that, my lord?"

"Perfectly."

"You see that men in the critical position in which they were placed, believing that George Barton was the only man who knew except yourself—whose mouth they may have believed they could keep shut—"

The earl started. George Barton paused. He saw a vivid flash of illumination pass over the earl's face. In truth the earl had recalled the circumstances of his interview with the solicitors in the morning—their strange hints and their mysterious manner. Had they then meant him to understand that he and they were equally interested in the closing of George Barton's mouth forever? Was it possible that having made him, the earl, a principal in a misdemeanor, they had thought of trapping him into becoming an accessory after the fact to a felony? He could hardly think it, but, if so, thank Heaven they had failed. His language and bearing had been too candid for them!

"Had anything occurred to you?" said George, who had been waiting for the earl to speak.

"Yes, a curious idea; but I can not believe it to be more than a suspicion. Do you know that, on reviewing the particulars of the interview I had with them this morning, I seem to have a sort of feeling that both the partners were on the verge of making me some important disclosure, which they concealed, possibly owing to something I said, or to my manner, which was very severe and defiant?"

"Why," said George Barton, "it appears to be only an impression you have, but it is important. Possibly they may have been alarmed and put upon their guard by your statement that I was acquainted with the details."

"Possibly," said the earl, with a puzzled expression. "However, I interrupted you."

"I was simply going to say it is quite conceivable that, when they were threatened with exposure, they thought they had only my father and you to fear, and—I can not help the suspicion—he may have fallen a victim to that idea."

"It is a horrible suspicion, George Barton. Bad as they are, I hardly dare permit myself to entertain it. But still, as you say, if motive has anything to do with crime, they had the strongest reasons for wishing him out of the way."

"You see you must try to realize the position as it would have been to-day had I been totally ignorant of what had taken place. You had intrusted those papers and bonds to my father's keeping. They had disappeared with him. I could have told you nothing about them. I am convinced your own good sense and generous confidence in George Barton would have led you, as soon as you had recovered from the shock to nerves and brain which you had experienced, to reject the theory.

"But that he had gone off with the securities there was still open the theory that my father had been entrapped, murdered, and robbed by some persons who knew that he had the bonds in his possession. There would have been nothing to prove that Pollard & Pollard had ever received those papers, since the receipt had perished with my father. The certificates, with the damning evidence of their dates, would also have disappeared on some pretext or other, and you having no cause to suspect anything wrong there, application would have been made in due time for new certificates, and the chances were a thousand to one against your ever learning anything about the dates of the lost ones. As regarded their restitution of the misappropriated money, they could easily have thrown dust in your eyes by recasting the accounts, and possibly by suggesting some new accountant or fellow-solicitor to audit them, who, for a handsome bribe, and being satisfied that the accounts were correct in fact though not in form, would have managed to cover up their wrong-doing. Lastly, the numbers of the United States bonds would have been advertised, and after a decent delay a dirty parcel would have been thrown into your area, or sent you by post, and you would have had no clew to the sender. Thus everything unpleasant would have been hushed up. They would have rendered themselves agreeable to the Earl of Selby by raising the money for him on the Kensington mortgage; and in gratitude for that, as well

as in consideration of the advisability of keeping a certain transaction secret, they would have been appointed your solicitors, and would have had the management of your estates. This, I say, would in all probability have been the situation if my father had not, through some providential premonition, made me his confidant."

The earl gazed at George Barton with astonishment as he thus sketched, in a few masterly outlines, the probable plan of Messrs. Pollard & Pollard's campaign, if they were the guilty authors of the murder.

"Why, Barton," he said, grimly, "one would think you had been at their elbows overhearing their plans, your sketch of them seems so horribly like a picture from life!"

"Ah! my lord," he replied, sadly, "I have thought it all out in bitter hours of reflection, and the instincts or the intuition of vengeance have come to my aid. My heart tells me I am right. And you see the mode of death selected—suggested, no doubt, by recent outrages—was one that almost certainly assured the destruction, along with the individual, not only of every means of identification, but of everything in the nature of evidence which he carried on his person."

"But this is inconceivable—it is horrible—it is unnatural—it is diabolic!"

"Epithets, my lord, which, in a greater or less degree, are applicable to every crime by which a human life is sacrificed. Granted once the impulse to the crime, the criminal will very rarely hesitate over the means."

"Have you confided your suspicions to the police?"

"Not a breath. I am convinced that that would be the way to defeat my own object. Consider that no sum would be too great to purchase immunity from punishment in this case. If my suppositions be correct, the guilty parties would not hesitate to try and bribe the subordinates in the Detective Department to throw dust in the eyes of their chiefs. You remember the revelations in a famous case? It would be hard to find any service so perfect that there were no weak spots here and there; and in this case the temptations held out would be simply immense."

"Well, Barton, I am in your hands. You can trust me as implicitly as I shall trust you. You have shown yourself to me today, under the most trying circumstances in which a man was ever placed, as possessed of qualities of head and heart which I envy and admire—and to me personally you have exhibited a generosity and greatness of mind which place me under obligations to you such as I shall never be able to discharge. You will allow me to say that, if you have lost a father, you will find your godfather ready to treat you as his own son. I can not fill Barton's place, but, as far as you will let me, I will charge myself with your future, and whatever remains of fortune or influence I possess shall be always at your service as if you were my own child."

As the earl uttered these words with an emotion which vouched for their sincerity, a strange light gleamed in George Barton's eyes. Had the earl known what daring ambitions were blazing in his godson's mind and pulsating in his heart, what hopes his words were

kindling, while he gave way to the generous impulses of his nature under the sense of his obligation to one who had thus started up to lend him a strong hand in the midst of all the perils which surrounded him, would he not have measured his words more carefully, and guarded them from giving the slightest encouragement to those audacious hopes? In these moments of grateful expansion men are apt to use words which carry to the hearer's heart a deeper and a wider meaning than the speaker ever dreamed of, and justify obligations he would be the first to repudiate.

Midnight had long passed when this conference broke up. George Barton proposed that for the present the earl should continue his relations with Pollard & Pollard, not giving them any inkling that he entertained suspicions of their good faith. A secret agent was to be selected to go to New York and get the dates of the transfers —and, if possible, the original transfers—of the Stockton railway shares. As vacation was close at hand, George suggested that Le Breton should be asked to take his holiday in that direction.

CHAPTER X.

THOUGHTS OF A SOCIETY BELLE.

WERE I a woman I might pretend to know something of a woman's inner life and egoism, and movements of heart. With a face which, as my glass might only too clearly show me, old Father Time had begun to touch here and there with his withering pencil, my heart might be still hung round with memories of passions, like faded tapestries, whereon the outlines of pale figures stood forth distinct, though the colors and the traits that were once so bright and so vivid were gone. And yet I might be unable to conceive what would be the kind of thoughts and feelings which people the mind and heart of a fair, clever belle of the season, rich, worshiped, flattered, pursued, the object of a thousand petty intrigues, of refurbished passions and fresh, foolish loves—shut up within a circle of trained and conventional beings, the product of the highest art of civilization, and of hot-house growth in artificial temperatures.

Curious in elegance of form or brilliancy of tint, reared in the tropical air of the glass house called "Society," exhibiting varieties of character or growth unknown to nature, and cunningly developed by human artifice—often do these products of civilized culture become strange, bizarre, even monstrous, as we may sometimes see from the current social annals, or when the rude anatomists of the Divorce Court pick the frail plants to pieces and expose their structure to vulgar gaze. Thinking over the lot of these aristocratic plants, I have often pondered that it must be a strange thing for the young heart bursting with life to feel that it is shut in from the wide air and the generous, universal glow of outer sunshine: that the space allotted to it, though costly and splendid, is measurable by inches, and not by the expansion of an illimitable horizon. Sometimes it may be the repressed yearning of these young hearts after the healthy light and the salutary freedom of the open sky, which causes them in maturer years to push out with a rank luxuriance—

like those great palms at Kew—until they can no longer be restrained within the crystal boxes in which their first growth was confined.

Lady Blanche was rather an exceptional society belle, and perhaps had more of the nature of those sub-tropical plants which are reared in the open air, though guarded jealously from the vicissitudes of a rough and vulgar climate. She was no mere sensitive plant, but had a vigor and expansion all her own. Her mind was strong enough to reject, and even to despise, some of the prejudices which would seem to be natural and almost inevitable accidents of her birth. She had grown precociously, as all human vegetables must grow in that aristocratic soil, but her mother's earliest effort had been to imbue her mind with the idea that woman's sphere was a large one; that within its periphery there lay unbounded possibilities of human grandeur and distinction—intellectual eminence, lofty and noble ambitions, influences on the society in which she lived, which might possibly extend far on into the future of her own race and of the world at large.

When the Countess of Selby, who was herself a noble and remarkable woman, fired the spirit of her young daughter by speaking to her of those virtuous and lofty beings who, endowed with the graces of feminine beauty and with the delicate frame and gentle qualities of the sex, had yet left a luminous trail of blessed and potent influences on the world, she had been careful to point out to her that many, if not most, of those great female characters, though born to social distinction, had not been spoiled by the corrupting airs of society; nor had they been fettered by its conventional chains. They had "emancipated" themselves in a far different sense from that implied when the term is now used by the ancient and haggard high-priestesses of a new cult, called "women's rights." They had evinced no jealousy of manhood, which was a distinct and admirable quality. They had been great and powerful, because they preserved their delicate feminine individuality, their woman's characteristics and relations to family and society, and precisely those tender and dependent qualities which it is the custom of the modern philosophic harpies to denounce; and the countess showed her daughter that, from the great Mary—who alone had the intelligence to detect and encourage and treasure in her infant son those innate qualities of divine aspiration which raise a man up to be a star in the firmament of intelligence, shining far above the vulgar crowd who gaze, with gaping wonder, at His glory—down through all the ages of Christian development, every era had had its women of great souls and brilliant intellects, creating, developing, cultivating, and multiplying around them some of the noblest of those influences which were elevating and purifying the race. The countess, indeed, was considered by some of her friends to be rather "*exaltée*," and they of course attributed it, like the word by which they expressed it, to French extraction. But the six years that had ensued since her death, and the more rigid and commonplace system of education which had been pursued by a series of instructresses, more or less penetrated with conventional ideas, had not effaced from Lady Blanche's mind the influence of her mother's words. One of the countess's sayings Lady Blanche had never forgotten. It was this:

"Keep your heart fresh and green by sprinkling it constantly with the pure, clear thoughts of the wise and good; and, above all, remember that it is your own, which you alone have the right to dispose of, and for the right guardianship and culture of which you yourself are chiefly responsible."

Had not the countess been true to her own apothegm? Had she not declined to allow her parents to dispose of her heart and person to a wealthy and amorous old peer, because she had discovered in his son qualities more in harmony with her own? True, the sacrifice she had made was no very great one, and it is not often that the alternatives presented to a woman are so evenly balanced; but she had, at all events, known what it was to suffer for asserting the right which she had reclaimed for every woman—the right to consider and to treat her heart as "her own." Hence it was that she created some perturbation in "Society" when she threw her powerful influence into the scale in favor of the marriage of one of the wealthiest heiresses of the aristocracy with a poor but promising young diplomatist, an *attaché* to one of the Foreign Embassies in London. In that case she was afterward triumphantly vindicated, for he is now one of the small and brilliant circle of advisers to one of the most puissant monarchs in Europe; but she would have defended her action all the same had he remained in a lower rank of patriotic service. She found out that the girl loved him, that he was not personally unworthy of it, and that was enough to prompt her chivalrous interference.

So that, perhaps—forgive me, most noble duchesses, marchionesses, countesses, and ladies of every degree, what I am going to say!—Lady Blanche, being a good deal more human than those other fresh beauties who come up from annual exhibition—like Leighton's or Millais's new pictures—one may be able to read and understand a little more of her heart than he might be to explain the workings of the curious, complicated watch-work which your system of education too frequently substitutes for natural flesh and blood.

This young lady, returning from the Queen's ball, always a dreary affair, and therefore terminating prematurely at the comparatively early hour of two in the morning, has thrown off all her robes of consequence, has endued herself, as becomes her purity, in the finest of white linen, and having thrown over this cool garment a soft, white robe of cashmere, has dismissed her maid. Instead, then, of going to bed and seeking that rest which her eyes testify that she is sadly in want of, she has thrown herself back on a long, low, luxurious chair, and, curling her feet up under her robe, reposed her finely-shaped head on her two hands, which are clasped behind it. And any one may peep in here with some confidence, for he is not required to read a society riddle, but a fresh, young, human heart.

Her face looks exquisite in repose; and just now all her features are in repose, but her eyes appear troubled. That is to say, there is a movement in their lustrous depths—a quick and furtive movement, like that of gold-fishes deep down in a clear pool, a flash now and then, and deep, crystalline darkness again.

The day gone by had certainly not been destitute of emotions. There was that strange visit in the morning to Lady Tilbury, the

recollection of which called up a little rose-color in Lady Blanche's cheek. It also brought before her the beautiful, matronly face of her mother in its graver and tenderer moments. It recalled her mother's words, which lay there locked up in the silver-clasped diary on her table as written down by herself years ago in her own strong, clear handwriting, every letter and stroke and dot of which now seemed as distinct to her eyes as if the page were lying open before her.

Had she, in that impulsive and generous moment toward her cousin Edward of Tilbury, quite correctly caught the spirit of those remarkable words? Her "heart was her own," but her mother had never meant to suggest that she should go and throw it away in a fit of generosity, however noble. It was the treasure-box of all the best and brightest jewels of her nature—when she gave that away she gave away herself—everything she possessed which was worth having for any one worthy to possess it.

In some fine natures there is a peculiar power of analysis which often exerts itself indefinitely and unconsciously, while the mind seems hovering betwixt dream and fancy. For the present, Lady Blanche, who could sit down on occasion and reason out things for herself in very logical and consistent fashion, was not in a reasoning mood. She was rather indulging in reverie. Without deliberately setting herself to ask why she had taken that curious step in the morning of the day gone by—as a termination to a long and wearisome sort of conflict which had been going on for some time within her, the crisis of which had been precipitated partly by Lord Tilbury's condition, and partly by a vivid realization of the agony of his mother during those anxious, weary hours of watching and suspense—she was vaguely passing in review the causes which had led her to take such a sudden resolution.

Was she "in love" with her cousin? Oh no! Her heart told her clearly that he had not touched the spring which makes the heart resound to the music of passion.

The experience of "coming out," which is looked upon as so serious an occasion in the life of a young maiden of the higher classes of society, though it has none of the solemnity which attaches to a "first communion," or a betrothal, or a marriage, nevertheless, for a girl who is not absolutely vapid or vicious, who is not imbued with the romantic conceits and pampered vanities of spoiled girlhood, has some grave sides to it, and gives occasion to many serious and troublous thoughts. The world suddenly ceases to be a nursery filled with lively companions, and bright with beautiful toys; it has turned into a theater of comedies and tragedies, wherein the acting is all too real. She has entered into a new existence, where women marry and are given in marriage; where ideas that only floated vaguely in the imagination loom nearer and more distinct, as possible realities; where the *jeune première* is called on to play a rôle, to appear and speak and act before a critical audience, to give the reply, to advance, to retire, to feign or feel all the emotions, to be at the same time artist and realist. She who has been simple and natural must learn social tact and diplomacy must acquire the art of reading the characters and designs of others, while she hides or deploys her own forces. If she be a beauty, she is a personage,

the object of adulation, flattery, intrigue, criticism, gossip—of flirtation, or of earnest and perhaps passionate rivalries.

Well, all this and more Lady Blanche had experienced. She was passing it all in review dreamily. Her mind, although it was penetrated with the fine fibers of poetry and sentiment, was strong and sensible. Her head had not been turned by her brilliant success as a *débutante* in the flimsy, Watteau-like theater of society. She had looked around her with composure, borne herself with dignity, managed to be gay without being frivolous, to be always bright and fascinating without being fast. But with all her success, and for the very reasons of her success, she had been profoundly disappointed. A chill, brusque shock had been given to the romantic side of her nature. Where she had hoped to meet at least a few social paladins of the other sex, she had found many stupid, feeble, and frivolous fops, and many brilliant but shallow young prigs. A few who seemed to have some better qualities of head were destitute of the finer qualities of the heart. In society she thought they were inhuman. They were graceless sticks—some of them certainly with gold tops—rather than living, spiritual men. She was too inexperienced as yet to be able to estimate the value of characters which were undeveloped; and the maturer characters—the minds with which she longed, in her ambition, to come in contact—were those of elderly men, men who had passed out of that era of priggery which Divine Providence and the leading instructors of English youth have decreed that it shall be the fate of every educated Englishman to pass through, and out of which, alas! too many of them never emerge. But, unhappily for Lady Blanche, most of these matured spirits were already in that state so aptly and accurately expressed by the word wedlock; and besides, such men as these rarely get the chance, and still more rarely take it, of paying court to a fashionable belle.

The lookout was indeed a dismal one.

Lady Blanche was very fond of her younger brother, "Charlie," who was seriously preparing himself for a political career, while his elder brother, Lord Layton, was wasting the paternal fortune, and his own few remaining physical and mental powers, in gambling and debauch. Lord Charles, without being a genius, had qualities which she could admire, and which distinguished him from the hundreds of young men who were floating about on the gay currents of society. Besides, he opened his mind as well as his heart to his sister, for whom he had a very deep regard. In her he had long recognized a superior nature, a spirit and capacity beyond his own. She could not help saying to herself very often that in that brilliant circle in which she moved she had not yet seen any one who came up to her brother Charlie. This was a great disadvantage to the young aspirants who had to bear comparison with so high a standard, and one, moreover, which was constantly at hand to suggest the comparison.

Then there was her cousin, the Earl of Tilbury, her intimate from babyhood. He used laughingly to pretend that he had carried her in his arms when she was in long frocks. She had always liked him. His was a curious, complex nature, a combination of shrewd sense, of practical aptitude, of buoyant physical spirits, of elevated

and remarkable culture for his age, and of cynical humor. He had only attained his majority a few months ago, yet he had made a clever little maiden speech in the House of Peers, and had started a stable on the turf. He was a dandy, and he had a sharp, incisive wit. He frequented at the same time the Carlton, the Marlborough, White's, Hurlingham, and Tattersall's; his name turned up in *tirs* at Nice and Cannes, and in the races at Auteuil or at Trouville; yet he attended the Quarter Sessions of his county, and proved that he could take a sensible and serious part in county affairs alongside of gray-headed men. He professed Conservative principles, to which his cynicism gave an odd flavor of Liberalism. Among all the gay crowd which had passed under the very critical eyes of Lady Blanche, he stood out as one of the most manly and estimable; and, besides, he was just such a wooer as a "sensible" girl in her position would allow herself to contemplate with favor. Moreover, he had shown in his way a marked preference for her. All this notwithstanding, he was not her Ideal!

Nothing can prevent that troublesome, vague, volatile Ideal from floating in between reason and the Real, disturbing the vision, and playing moonshine with the sensible and proper course of men and women's inclinations.

So that Lady Blanche, having arrived very near the end of the season, felt a vast and deep disappointment as she looked about her, and began to contemplate seriously the possibilities of her future fate. It was useless for her to try to put the question aside altogether. That is one of the compensating luxuries reserved for the girls of the middle classes, and too many people, including her father, were interested in the result to allow her to do that. Otherwise she would gladly have dismissed the subject, or left it to the chapter of accidents.

But had no human figure ever presented itself to her eyes and mind, which, whatever its accidents, intrinsically seemed to be at least a worthy embodiment of her Ideal? Had any one outside that charmed innermost circle of the aristocracy, to which her views were supposed to be confined, touched her heart sufficiently to give it a troubled movement whenever his image floated before her memory?

Her answer, had the question been put squarely to her, would have been "No"—and it would have been a true one. Up to this June morning, at all events, which is just about to dawn, Lady Blanche's heart was free. And yet she had often thought that there was one man, with whose face, figure, air, and abilities she was very familiar, who was very near her type of a manly and perfect character. He had sense, intelligence, wit, culture; he had a chivalrous bearing toward women, and a dignified carriage and great social adroitness among men. His dark, deep eyes, his rich mellow voice, the sympathy which seemed to radiate from him with magnetic influence, his features, not precisely handsome, but full of intelligence and candor—all made him peculiarly attractive to women. Lord Charles and Lord Tilbury not only liked him, but had made him quite a friend. He had been a familiar figure to her almost from childhood. But then he was George Barton, the agent's son, a gentleman, but not in the least degree likely to look so high, any more than she was likely to look so low. She could esteem him,

and be all the more easy and familiar with him that there must always be on both sides a consciousness of their relative positions. Alas! we have seen that, as far as he was concerned, that had not prevented him from looking and looking again, until his heart had taken the daring leap. Is it possible that perhaps, just now and then, when the potent spell of George Barton's society was still around her, such a thought as this may have flashed through her mind, but so lightly and rapidly as not to reveal anything serious? "What a pity that he is not the Marquis of Broadacres instead of the idiot who is!" Or when she was bored and disgusted by the stupid attentions of Lord Prattlecombe, the millionaire baron, son of an iron-master, had she ever thought, "If he were only such a man as George Barton"? Such a thought, it it ever had arisen, had soon been dismissed and left no sentimental traces on her memory.

Whatever follows, therefore, we must do this justice to Lady Blanche, that in that singular impulse to give her Cousin Edward a chance, which was as good as an offer, she had not been unfaithful to any secret love.

As she lay there, reflecting how disappointed she had been with everybody and everything, she could not help thinking what a goose she had made of herself in the morning, or avoid feeling glad that nothing serious had come of it. She knew now that she had had the narrowest escape in her life from doing an irredeemably wrong thing. She almost shuddered when she began to realize how she would have felt at that moment had she really been committed to the Earl of Tilbury.

Leaving that subject, her thoughts turned to her father and his secret yet evident anxiety, and then, by a natural course, to George Barton and his troubles. The shortest cut to a woman's heart is through her pity, and when she began to recall his face, his words, his dejected appearance, his evident anguish, the figure of George Barton began to assume in her eyes a strangely moving and sympathetic aspect. Her impulse to see him and speak to him the night before had been dictated by pure good-nature, for her feelings toward him were very friendly. She would have done as much for her music-master, Mr. Pistachio, who certainly had not inspired the grand passion in any woman for twenty years. But it was not possible for her to think of George Barton after that evening as she had thought of him before. In the excitement of the moment he had betrayed too much to the quick-witted girl. When she recalled his face and words and acts, her first impulse was to regret it all—to wish it had not happened—to say that it was most unfortunate, and would put a considerable restraint upon their intercourse—in fact, exactly what a judicious matron would say that such a girl ought to have thought under such circumstances.

But all this was suddenly swept away by a great rush of sympathy through her heart. As he kissed her hand she had experienced a thrill of feeling unlike anything she had ever felt before. Do what she would, she could not forget the sensation. The troubled, appealing look of his eyes came up vividly before her. She reflected on the sharpness of his trial, the terrible nature of his sufferings, and appreciated far beyond its standard the nobility with which he bore his sorrow. How glad she would have been to speak

some words of comfort to him, to help him to endure his grief! Had he only been a Tilbury or a Beauchamp! Had it only been possible to regard him as a serious aspirant!

But this reverie was becoming dangerous, and with George Barton's striking, appealing, melancholy face still before her eyes, Lady Blanche started—yawned, stretched her arms, and cried,

"How silly I am! It is nearly daylight, and I have not had a wink of sleep!"

Words so absolutely practical and unsentimental that we may fairly abandon the young beauty for the present to the chaste arms of Morpheus, for she ceases to be interesting.

CHAPTER XI.

A DETECTIVE DETECTED.

We have said that, when Mr. Grayson reported to Messrs. Pollard & Pollard that the Earl of Selby had gone straight from their office to young Barton's chambers, the two partners looked at each other with consternation.

But an incident had occurred which Mr. Grayson did not think fit to report, and which, had he done so, would not have served to allay their anxiety.

Another person had followed the earl from the very door of the solicitors' office, and this person ran against Mr. Grayson on the stairs of No. 18 King's Bench Walk.

"Ha!" he said, "Pollard & Pollard?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Grayson, mechanically, thrown off his guard by the familiar manner of the address, which is in accordance with a formula in use among lawyers' clerks at court or judges' chambers when addressing or asking for the representative of a firm whose personal identity is unknown to them.

"I thought so. Following up the Earl of Selby, eh?"

"I don't see what business that is of yours," retorted Mr. Grayson, astonished at the stranger's impudence. "Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Smith & Smith, or Jones & Jones, whichever you please," said the stranger, with what Mr. Grayson considered to be misplaced levity. "But look here," the stranger added, in a confidential tone, while venturing to place his arm in a familiar way under that of the old clerk, "it happens to be just my business, my dear friend, and if you will only permit me the opportunity, I'll tell you why. But it will take some time. Let's go into the Mitre and have a snack, or a glass of something, and I'll be happy to explain."

The man was not a suspicious-looking person. He was well dressed, and would have passed as a respectable solicitor's clerk; a gold chain flourished rather pretentiously on his buff waistcoat. There was a seductive ease and familiarity about his manner, though his face was by no means handsome, and altogether Mr. Grayson's curiosity was awakened. So he went along with his man, who chatted brightly.

The two gentlemen were soon engaged in taking a very considerable "snack" together, in the shape of a few pounds of roast beef,

washed down by a bottle of sherry. I have been told by a detective that there is no liquid which has such virtues as an opener of the heart as the fiery stuff sold for sherry at six shillings a bottle in a London restaurant. Champagne makes a man *bavarder*, as the French say, but it reaches only the lighter faculties, excites the wit, the spirit of mischief, and other bad spirits—it does not touch the secret springs of being. Besides, it takes a good deal of it to operate on a seasoned cask, and it is costly. Beer "goes to the feet," and gives them, and the brain also, a leaden feeling of comfort and security, and, if anything, rather tends to shut a man up than to make him communicative. Port wine is distinctly an insolvent. It muddles, but it gives no expansion. Whisky, taken neat, in sufficient quantities, has an awakening effect, especially on a Scotchman, up to a certain point, but it excites the wrong faculties—it arouses the quarrelsome tendencies in some men and the cautious in others: hot, with sugar, the patient who imbibes it sometimes becomes confidential at the fifteenth or sixteenth glass, but, as lawyers say, time then becomes of the essence of the contract. The soothing effects of gin are too well known to need description, but before a man is thrown off his guard under its influences, his communications, however confidential, become muddy and embarrassing. For "touching up" a man rapidly and giving him a general sense of well-being and of affection for his next neighbor, for opening the secret chambers of his heart, and bringing their contents under the inspection of the curious inquirer, London sherry, made in Hamburg with potato brandy, is the article which in the vast majority of cases has the most rapid and deadly effect. According to my informant, "it touches up every corner;" it pervades, invades, and subdues the entire being.

The gentleman who had shown himself so generous to Mr. Grayson selected sherry, and out of consideration for his guest, permitted the latter to consume the greater part, indeed nearly the whole, of the bottle. It was a long time since old Grayson had had such a treat, and though naturally of a cautious and silent temperament, he, when his heart was warmed up, and his temples began to beat, grew confidential with his new friend. This gentleman had put him at his ease by telling him that he was engaged on the same secret service as himself—"*in strict confidence*, he was a detective from Scotland Yard," employed at the instance of Messrs. Pollard & Pollard, to try and discover the whereabouts or the fate of Mr. Barton. It seems the most natural thing in the world to unbosom one's self to a detective when one knows he is after somebody else.

"Of course," he said, with a meaning glance at Mr. Grayson, "we've got to watch what the earl does, you see, because he was Mr. Barton's principal."

"Oh, of course," said Mr. Grayson, winking as if he perfectly comprehended the cryptical game of the detective force, though he was inwardly astonished to hear it.

"I see you were doing the same," said the detective. "Ah! you're clever people! Very able firm, Pollard & Pollard; very sharp, eh?"

"As razors," said Mr. Grayson.

"And I see by your looks and appearance you're one of their confidential clerks—an old 'un."

"I have been thirty years at Pollard & Pollard's; and to tell you the truth, you know, this is confidential business I'm on now," said Mr. Grayson, with pride. "To-day Mr. Joseph Pollard called me into the private room, and he said, 'Look here, Grayson, this is strictly private and confidential business, you know—not a word to the other clerks—the Earl of Selby is one of our best clients—we want to know where he is going to—you follow him up, regardless of expense—and find out all about it. There's a sovereign for you for expenses.'"

"By Jove! do things in royal style, eh?"

"I should think they do—one of the first firms in London," said Mr. Grayson, whose memory, it will be noted, had, among other faculties, been rather affected by the sherry.

"Yes, quite so; very clever of them to think of it. Ha, ha! They didn't know that I was waiting to do the same thing. Ah! they're long-headed men, they are. I suppose, now, they do an immense business for the Earl of Selby?"

"Well, you know," replied Grayson, "they're solicitors to the great Tilbury estate, for which Lord Selby is executor, and then they're solicitors to Lord Tilbury's mother; and I should say between 'em it's worth over a thousand or two a year. But, Lord bless your soul, that's nothing to our people."

"Flea-bite, eh? And then, I suppose, they are the Earl of Selby's lawyers?"

"Not exactly. You see, Mr. Barton—the man that cut it—was the Earl of Selby's agent. But there's lately been a good deal of business, in our office for the earl—very confidential business, you know—all kept in the private room, and done by the head clerk or one of the partners—borrowing, I fancy"—here Mr. Grayson winked—"sometimes, you know, these rich noblemen spend too much money, and need a little accommodation."

"Exactly," nodded and said the obliging friend, as if he had been in the business, and understood it thoroughly. "And then they don't like to tell their own private agents, and so they go to a first-class firm they can trust—like Pollard & Pollard—and get them to make a confidential advance on deposit of title-deeds—that's it—hey?"

"That's the way!" said Mr. Grayson, tossing off another glass of sherry. "Fine wine that—dry—nutty—clean to the palate."

"Take another glass. So Lord Selby has been borrowing privately?"

Mr. Grayson suddenly paused, with the glass half-way to his mouth, and said,

"I say Mr.—what did you say your name was?"

"Dillon."

"Mr. Dillon, now you're asking too much. What's that got to do with Mr. Barton? Mr. Barton never knew anything about it till a short time ago, a fortnight or so, and I expect that it was his finding it out that all the row's about."

"Oh! there's been a row then!" mentally ejaculated "Mr. Dillon." Orally, he said,

"I don't want you to tell me anything whatever that's confidential, Mr. Grayson. I see that you wouldn't do so any way, if I were to ask you. Let me explain to you what my idea was. You see, I thought that you and I might be mutually useful to one another in this business—as we are both interested on the same side, you know."

Mr. Grayson nodded.

"Now, I am going to speak to you in the strictest confidence, Mr. Grayson, and if you don't keep it to yourself, well, then, I shall get the sack, and you will lose the chance of making a good thing out of it. You know there'll be a good deal of money going over this job, and I'm very anxious to make a job of it. There's six hundred pounds offered by your firm alone, and there's that young Mr. Barton has been talking of offering five hundred more. Then I think the Government may offer something"—this was a gratuitous and offensive slander of the *soi-distant* Mr. Dillon's upon a Liberal Government, invented on the spur of the moment. "You see, our business, Mr. Grayson, is a high art—a very difficult one. It isn't always by the information we get direct from the parties that we find out the right clew to these secret crimes and disappearances; it's by getting to know what's underneath, you know—little things which people don't think to be of any consequence, and forget to tell us, or perhaps don't like to tell us, because they are compromising to their clients; quite harmless things, you know, which just give us a hint, and which we always treat in the strictest confidence. Little things may happen—let us say, for instance, in your office—which would escape the observation of big men like your principals, and which they would never mention to us, and yet which might, you know—might help to put us on the right scent, and so help us to ferret out the whole mystery. Well, a man like you, who is always on the spot—always keeps his eyes and ears open, I can see that—could give me a hint now and then of what was going on—without betraying any confidence, mind; we don't encourage that in our department—that is not good policy, and it ain't honorable—but he might help us to make more out of the information we get from the firm—don't you see—and he would be helping them at the same time he was helping us."

"I won't betray no secrets of the firm," said Mr. Grayson, shutting up his lips in the Chubbs lock fashion, as he had done before his principals.

"Precisely; that is no more than I would have expected of a man of your position and standing as a confidential clerk, Mr. Grayson, and you would be very careful not to overstep the bounds of honor and duty. But you could throw a good deal of light upon the information I have from time to time—and so serve us and your people, and yourself, Mr. Grayson, at the same time—for of course it would be understood that there was *quid pro quo*, as you lawyers say; we could not put you to trouble without sharing some of the profit with you. Well, all I ask of you is this: I don't want to be worrying your principals every half-hour for little items of information; I only want to be able, when I don't quite understand the bearing of anything that turns up, to come to

you in a friendly way, as it were, and ask your opinion about it, and get your advice as to what I should do; and of course it would be understood that if I were to ask anything you felt bound in honor not to answer, why, then you would just say so, frankly, you know—no offense on either side—and we should then apply officially to your principals to give us the information. It's only to facilitate matters, you see."

Mr. Grayson nodded. The delicate consideration shown by the detective struck him with admiration.

"Well, then, it's agreed on that footing that if you will help me in this confidential way—and strictly between ourselves, mind—you will receive a remuneration, certain; and if we succeed in pulling the business through, then you shall have a share of the reward—all between ourselves, you know—and it will add something handsome to your year's income."

"That's all fair and square enough," said Mr. Grayson. "So long as you don't ask me to betray any confidence, I'm your man, Mr.—Mr.—Mr.—"

"Dillon."

"Dillon?" His jaw suddenly dropped. "Why, you ain't—"

"No, no!" said the other, laughing; "I ain't the Irish member. God forbid!"

"Well, Mr. Dillon — By the way, can't you give me your card?"

"No; but look here; I will write down my name and address—you had better communicate with me at my private address—No. 50 Randall Street, Chelsea." Mr. Dillon wrote the address on a leaf of a memorandum-book, which he took out of his pocket, and handed it to Mr. Grayson, adding, "And look here, I know you lawyers like a retainer—hey? Let me hand you this as a first installment. It's a ten-pun' note."

"Oh! Mr.—Mr.—" said Mr. Grayson, with a feeble gesture of denegation.

"No, no, I insist. *Quid pro quo*, my dear sir. Nothing for nothing, that's my motto. And now I must be going, to see what our noble friend is doing. He must have got through his say with young Barton by this time. And of course you are going to make your confidential report to Messrs. Pollard & Pollard. Well, you will permit me, if you please, to discharge the little bill! Happy to have made your acquaintance, Mr. Grayson. Hope it will conduce to our mutual profit, advantage, and benefit. Good-day, Mr. Grayson. Your most obedient."

From this it will be seen that Mr. Sontag was a man of genius. He was pursuing his inquiries in what we have termed an underground manner; and not content with looking for traces of the missing Mr. Barton wherever he could find them, or of the crime wherever they directly presented themselves, he was also determined to watch the pursuers, the persons who had given him his instructions, or professed to be interested in the pursuit, and to acquire from or through them, *nolens volens*, a knowledge of the real relations which existed between them and the persons for the problem of whose fate they had asked him to find the solution. Hence he had given instructions that every movement of Messrs. Pollard &

Pollard, and of their distinguished client, the Earl of Selby, should be carefully watched and reported to him.

When Mr. Grayson entered the office of his employers, another gentleman who had been standing and walking about in the neighborhood in an unoccupied way, examining the houses and the landscape afforded by the Fields, took note of it and of the hour, and continued to wander about promiscuously, like an uneasy spirit. He was joined later on in the afternoon by another gentleman without spectacles, but with very bushy eyebrows, which were quite as readily taken off as spectacles, and were not so liable to fracture. These two gentlemen spied the goings-out and comings-in of the two partners, and were told off to ascertain the names and addresses of all persons with whom they held communication outside their offices. From an early hour on Saturday morning, before they had left their respective homes in Regent's Park and South Kensington, Messrs. Pollard & Pollard had been subjected to this most bureaucratic and un-British espionage. Mr. Sontag began to take action before the famous conference at the Home Office.

The wanderer with the spectacles followed Mr. Pollard, senior, to his domicile in York Terrace, Regent's Park, and had nothing further to report. The gentleman with the bushy eyebrows was destined to make a bad night of it. Mr. Charles Pollard did not leave his office until nearly seven o'clock, and instead of turning westward he walked, twirling his thin umbrella, to the London, at the foot of Chancery Lane, where he dined at his ease. He did not notice the gentleman who sat at the next table, who seemed more engrossed with the perusal of the "St. James's Gazette" than with the excellent joint of mutton which was served at that capital establishment, and who somehow appeared to have as much leisure as the wealthy solicitor, for he managed to take an hour and a half to his dinner, and only rose to leave when Mr. Charles Pollard had paid his bill and taken his hat. In Fleet Street Mr. Pollard took a hansom. He of the bushy eyebrows also took a hansom, and requested the driver to keep the other in view.

The leader, following the directions he had received, drove down through Fenchurch Street and Aldgate to Whitechapel, but instead of continuing along the Whitechapel Road he took the Commercial Road, and drew up at the corner of Cannon Street Road. There he was discharged. The other hansom was stopped and discharged before arriving at the corner. When Mr. Pollard emerged from the hansom he seemed a different person from the foppishly-dressed citizen who had entered it. A long, rough, light tweed over-all, which he had carried on his arm in leaving the office now enshrouded him from neck to heels. A pair of formidable green spectacles, necessary, no doubt, to protect the eyes from the brilliant twilight of the East End, completely hid his eyes. Glancing round after his cab had departed, he plunged into a maze of lanes lying to the east of Cannon Street Road, between the Commercial Road and a street with the suggestive nautical name of Cable Street, and walking smartly for some minutes, carefully dodged by the shadow with the bushy brows, he at length reached an old house situated in a narrow and dirty *cul-de-sac*. Looked at from without the house seemed to be unoccupied, but the solicitor let himself in with a

latch-key. The shadow was left kicking his heels outside for twenty minutes, during which time the twilight had time to deepen into darkness. There was no public-house in the court in which a man might while away the time, or improve an hour which was by no means shining. So the man with the bushy eyebrows lit a pipe and stood with his back to a dirty wall at the extreme end of the inclosure, whence he was enabled to command the doors of all the houses opening on it. He was in the shadow, and could not be perceived, though looking up toward the mouth of the court he could see perfectly everything moving within it. The spot, however, had been well chosen, if secrecy were Mr. Pollard's object. During the period of our detective's watch only one human being entered the court, a woman, and a few cats flitted to and fro paying their evening calls. Presently there was the click of a latch, and a person emerged from the door which Mr. Charles Pollard had entered. Glancing sharply at this individual the detective saw that it was not his man. He was dressed in a short pea-jacket, with a very wide pair of trousers, heavy boots that sounded through the court like a pair of *sabots;* a big sou'-wester covered a tangled head of hair, and a painful limp seemed to indicate that this mariner, ancient or modern, had fallen from the tops and permanently injured one of his legs. At first the detective did not seem inclined to move; but when he saw this individual, flourishing a big stick, turn toward the entrance of the court and stump away with a good deal of vigor, he reconsidered, slipped quietly along the wall, and after he had got out to the street beyond managed to pass the tar and get a glimpse at his face in the full blaze of a public-house.

"Gad!" he said to himself; "I swear I should never have known him!"

And slipping back he left the court and all its secrets behind, and proceeded to follow closely the limping ultra-marine.

This individual stumped along quickly, and after a few turns crossed Cable Street, and went down New Gravel Lane, in the now historic district of Wapping. He turned to the right of this lane into a fresh maze of streets and courts, and eventually reached the water-side, where stood a low public-house, dirty, dingy, ancient, rotting, dropping forward as if it were going every minute to fall into the river, and from which proceeded such boisterous sounds as are wont to come from those who go down to the sea in ships when they are primed with bad spirits and befogged with the blackest and strongest of tobacco. Then he went in.

The detective was now at his wits' end what to do. He had not been prepared for Mr. Charles Pollard's surprising capacity of metamorphosis. To enter this marine hostelry at that hour dressed in the garments even of a solicitor's clerk was to excite suspicious attention, if not to court certain death by incontinent administration of Thames water, whereof so little was consumed on the premises. He turned back quickly into the main street, where he had observed a policeman, found him, explained the situation, and told him he must have a nautical disguise immediately. The policeman introduced him by the private door into a public-house, where he seemed to be on intimate terms. In a few minutes the dress of a drunken sailor was on our detective's back; he rubbed his hand

across the ceiling above a petroleum lamp, then over his face and hands, and thus, having given himself the appearance of a seaman fresh from a collier or an unwashed stoker, he rapidly returned to the Dutch Lugger, a venerable inn which, in its day, had seen almost as much iniquity as the interior of a nobleman's castle in the Middle Ages. The policeman of the beat did not care to venture down there alone, but he agreed to hang about the top of the street, and upon hearing a certain whistle, to come to the assistance of his colleague in the superior service. Unhappily the detective was unarmed, and the policeman not having a revolver, even in that dangerous spot, could not lend him one.

Our detective knew his business. When he entered the Dutch Lugger he did not walk in, he staggered against the swinging doors, and almost fell through them into the room; but he was brought up sharp by the bar, which stood only three feet from the door. The place was so full of steam and smoke that no one would have noticed the maneuver had they been inclined to remark so ordinary an event in that place. Only a lynx-eyed drab, with draggled hair and garments, owing to the rough caresses to which her vocation of bar-maid subjected her from the customers, observed this incontinent ingress, and said, sharply,

"Now, then, stoopid, where are you going to?"

"G—g—g—hic—give us a hot gin," he replied. "Oh, you beauty!"

He tumbled through a half-door about two feet wide into a large, low apartment, divided by low partitions into boxes, in which a considerable number of seafaring men of all nations and a few miserable women were drinking and smoking. No one seemed to notice him. Throwing round a sharp, quick glance from beneath the shaggy eyebrows, he took in the whole scene, and saw his man sitting in a box at the far end of the room, with a broad-shouldered person whose back was turned toward the door. Then, gyrating cleverly down the room, he, with a big oath, came to an anchor in the next box, which happened to be unoccupied. There, spreading out his arms on the narrow shelf which served for a table, he let his head fall upon them with a thud. The broad-shouldered man who had doubtless selected his box for the very reason that it was secluded, rose and looked sharply over the partition at the half-recumbent figure.

"It's all right," he said to the person opposite to him; "he's a collier's seaman, black as coal and drunk as—"

The quick ear of the detective was struck by the man's tone of voice, accent, and manner of speech, which were those of a person of culture and breeding who had been depraved by misfortunes or by vulgar associations. If he were a criminal he was not one of the ordinary type. He spoke as only those speak who have been brought up and have mixed in good society. He expressed himself with a good deal of nervous ease and force, and the vulgarities which now and then slipped into his conversation contrasted oddly with the general correctness of his language, and the clever, caustic cynicism which it is the custom of well-bred gentlemen to substitute for the coarse brutalities of the vulgar and ignorant.

The observations of the detective were, however, rudely disturbed

by the young lady of the bar, who, approaching with the hot stuff he had ordered, and finding her customer in a posture indicating that previous potations had already proved too much for his stability, hit him a sharp rap on the head with the bottom of the thick tumbler containing the beverage, spilling over him a quantity of boiling liquid, which certainly had the effect of stirring him up, while she cried out in a strident voice that rang through the room.

"Now, then, you boozy blank you, don't you know we ain't allowed to serve drunken people on these premises?"

The man, though he had been sharply scalded, gave a grunt, and said,

"I ain't d-d-drunk a drop to-night, you lying old ——. I'm all right;" in testimony whereof he took the tumbler from her hand, spilling part of its contents with well-feigned tremor. "Here, I say, sweet Polly, give us a kiss before you go." And drawing the frowzy damsel on his knee, he administered a smack which sounded like the application of a wet swab to a hollow deck. A box on the ear of equal resonancy followed this daring exploit, and the miserable creatures who had been watching this scene laughed uproariously, while the bar-maid, having taken a gulp out of the glass in sign of a cessation of hostilities, marched off with her hands on her hips, giggling, and winking to some of her intimate friends as she went along. The man, having gulped down a few mouthfuls of the liquor, suffered the glass to fall on its side and empty its contents on the floor, and his head dropped forward again heavily on his arms, outstretched upon the narrow plank which served for a table.

This little scene, which had not passed unperceived by the occupants of the next box, completely dissipated any suspicions they might have been disposed to entertain of their neighbor's capacity for understanding their conversation, and they continued to talk freely, but in tones so low that the listener sometimes had the greatest difficulty in distinguishing the words amid the drunken clamor of the other guests of the inn.

"When did he leave?" said the voice of Mr. Charles Poilard, pursuing some train of inquiry which had been interrupted by the entrance of the sham mariner.

"Yesterday afternoon, in the 'Guadalquivir,' for Galveston. He will find his way from there to Vera Cruz, and the interior of Mexico, and thence to hell which is his ultimate destination."

"Do—do you feel quite sure of him? Is he trustworthy?"

The other laughed.

"You can trust him just as far as you see him, not one-hundredth part of an inch further."

"But, good heavens, Yates—"

"D—n you, sir! I thought I told you never to mention names under any circumstances! In such business as ours dead men listen, and sometimes even talk, and drunken men have ears." He got up hastily, and threw a quick but careful glance into the next box, from which at that moment proceeded a deep, stertorous breathing. "It is infernally stupid," he said, resuming his seat and the conversation. "If you must use a name, can't you call me Thrupp—

or why put yourself to the inconvenience of naming me at all? Ours is a *société anonyme*, you know."

"Ha! very good. I beg your pardon. I will try not to forget myself again. But I was going to ask, what do you mean? Surely you have not intrusted a—a matter of this importance to an irresponsible person?"

"My dear friend and patron," said the other, in a voice of raillery, "is not my neck in danger as well as yours? I do not pretend to be better than I am—and I own that the stretching of your elegant collar-stump would not excite in my bosom any emotion beyond that of regret that I had lost a friend whose interest it was to be generous: but I have some regard for my own. I selected this rascal because he was the very cleverest operator that ever engaged in—in the kind of business you wot of, and you know you gave him deuced little time to do the job in. Why, my dear fellow"—the detective fancied he could see Mr. Charles Pollard wince under this familiarity, and from the expression he guessed that the speaker took a savage pleasure in annoying the solicitor by constantly assuming this tone—"I trust no one. I mean that I no more believe in our departed agent's good faith, at whatever price you may seek to purchase it, than I do in yours, or in those of any other man who is not a lunatic or an enthusiast. I suppose certain noble persons, for instance, had some confidence in your integrity and good faith, or you would not have been in a position to make those irregular appropriations of their worldly substance which have driven you to seek the aid of a scientific expert to cover up your little errors. I judge of a man's honesty from the circumstances. When I know that he has more to lose than gain by betraying my confidence, I trust him, and not otherwise. This man will keep quiet for the same reason that you or I shall keep quiet—it is a matter of life and death to him to do so."

"You—you are rather—cynical—captain—I mean—aren't you?"

"Call it anything you please—'Give a dog a bad name'—eh? Do you see the joke?"

"I confess," replied the other, "I am not able—ah—"

"Ah! you were never at the University probably? You don't know the origin of the word cynic, I suppose?" said the broad-shouldered man, with a slight inflection of scorn.

"No. I confess—"

"I wonder you use it then. However, I am not going to act the tutor, though I am a Master of Arts. I was going to tell you about this gentleman, who is now tossing up and down in the 'Guadalquivir,' somewhere off the Lizards, I suppose. I am sure of him only because he daren't show himself here again. He is at this moment affectionately being inquired after by the police, for—a—well—to explain certain circumstances attending the demise of a lamented old gent in Hackney, a scion of the tribe of Judah and retired pawnbroker, who left his house about two months ago with a parcel of diamonds—in which valuable and easily-portable gems he continued to speculate after his retirement from business—took the train for Broad Street on his way to Hatton Garden—vanished like a dream—was never seen again, nor the diamonds either. Unfortunately, the police, who have had their eye on our friend for a long

time, though they never could lay hold of any direct proof against him, discovered that some one answering to his description had entered the compartment occupied by Mr. Cohen at Highbury, and they resolved to arrest him. However, he had a kindly intimation from a friend in Scotland Yard, and just escaped by the skin of his teeth, for his house—he lived in a small, detached villa in the charming suburb of Fulham—was surrounded by detectives only a few minutes after he had walked out of the back gate. He was a devilish shrewd fellow, and had often got off scot-free, but he told me it was getting too hot for him in England, and that after one more big *coup* he meant to levant, but he would have one more. I never saw such a fellow. He took as much pleasure in a robbery or a murder as a school-boy does in stripping an orchard. He would commit a crime, I verily believe, simply for the excitement and peril of the thing; I don't think the money to be gained ever had much to do with it. He once told me his history. From a boy, he said, his main pleasure was to mystify and circumvent any one who had any authority over him—parents, tutors, professors, police—he was, in fact, a born criminal, with a love of the profession for its own sake. There are such fellows, you know."

A shudder seemed to pass through the frame of Mr. Pollard. He said,

"Why, he's a demon!"

"Well," said the other, with a harsh laugh, "when you want the devil's work done, you surely don't expect to get an angel to do it for you?"

This remark was evidently not palatable to the chief auditor. He snorted, coughed, cleared his throat, and stated that the smoke and closeness of the place had a disagreeable effect.

"But," he added, "who is this man?"

"I told you," said the other, "that I object to mention names. He is, however, a German, a man of good education—graduated at Bonn—took to chemistry, in which he became very strong, and might have made a fortune, for he is immensely clever. If anybody could have discovered the philosopher's stone or the transmutation of metals, he was the man. He made a good deal of money in a legitimate way—invented some fine dyes—a new process of bleaching—a cartridge, which, I believe, is in use now in the German army—a process for mixing metals and producing some wonderful imitations of gold and silver; in fact he is a regular genius—or rather an irregular one; for no sooner had he invented anything than he sold the patents, rioted away till the money was spent, and then set his wits to work to devise some new sensation in chemistry or crime. He was a Socialist and Anarchist or professed to be—had to cut for his life once from Berlin, where he was mixed up in a plot to kill the emperor. He had invented small crystal bombs which, when broken, would send forth an odor so deadly and powerful that all living things within its influence perished. Old Kaiser William is used to stinks, for he lives on the Spree, to which a sewer is cologne-water; but this would have done for the —— old hypocrite if it had only once got within reach of his nostrils, and might have saved Europe a good deal of anxiety."

"Bah! my dear sir," said the other. "Come now, that is rather

—a—a little *de trop*, isn't it, now? Wouldn't the stuff have killed the manufacturer?"

"It very nearly did kill the manufacturer. Although he wore a glass mask, and an apparatus he had invented for supplying him with air while he made his experiments, some of the stuff penetrated into his lungs, and if he had not been as strong as a bull he would have succumbed. Do you know how the scheme fell through?"

"Of course I don't."

"Well, three Socialist conspirators were told off to do the trick. They were to nab the emperor in his open phaeton in the Thiergarten. Our mutual friend had supplied each of them with one of his crystal stink-pots. They met to arrange their respective rôles, and one of them was holding one of the balls in his fingers when it dropped. Presto! all three of these ardent reformers went the way they intended to have sent old William—a proof that Providence, who seems of late years to go to sleep very often, now and then wakes up. That was how the plot was discovered. Two of the German police, in searching the bodies, found the balls, and opening one to try it, fell victims of their curiosity. There was no chemist in Berlin who would undertake to analyze the third and only surviving bomb. Our friend crossed the frontier into France, and as the evidence against him was imperfect, the German Government did not succeed in its demand for an extradition. He has given the Nihilists many useful hints—they have even published some of his damnable prescriptions in their journals in France—but these inventions labor under the disadvantage of being so dangerous to the operators that they don't like to try them. He has also, as I said, done a little business in destructive chemistry on his own hook. This last stroke was one of his cleverest combinations, but it did not succeed as completely as he meant it to."

"Confound it, Mr.—ahem! I mean—confound it! I wish you had employed some other agent, who would have taken a less ingenious and sensational manner of operating. He has only excited the energies of the police to the highest point. Had I known it, I would never have consented to anything so utterly monstrous and horrible."

"Pooh! When you have made up your mind to the end, what odds does it make how the thing is done? Knock a man on the head—shoot him with a pistol—slash him with a knife; push him into the river—strangle him—blow him up with nitro-glycerine—it all comes to the same thing, my learned friend; and that thing is—murder."

He did not speak the fatal word aloud, but the eager listener on the other side of the partition guessed what it was. It evidently caused a profound emotion in the other hearer, who gave a kind of groan, and was silent for a minute. Then he said,

"Why do you say he did not succeed completely?"

"Well, I will tell you. We had a little inkling, you know, that a certain nobleman, who shall be nameless, was mixed up in this business, and we thought it would be equally agreeable to you that he also should change his sphere of action. It was the German who suggested it, because he took a fancy to the cleverness of the combination, and I believe he wished to signalize his last appearance in

England as an expert by a special and supreme *tour de force*. You remember your instructions simply were that the party, you know, was on no account to be allowed to meet the other party. Well, we had to 'carry out our instructions'—that's the phrase, I think, in your profession?—at all events, in spirit. It would suit you equally well if they did meet and went off together. And we hit upon this method as the best, because it was likely to be mistaken for an Irish outrage. Wasn't the earl once Lord Lieutenant, or Chief Secretary, or something, of Ireland? The plan was to get the destructive machine slipped into the pocket of the gentleman we are alluding to—set to go off in half an hour, about ten minutes before he went into the house of the other party—d'ye see? Then, to paraphrase the most vulgar of proverbs, we should have killed two birds with one torpedo, besides emptying a handsome aristocratic library of its books and furniture in less time than it takes to say 'Walker.' In fact, it would been a case of *pair sauté à la Russe*; d'ye see? The explosive was of his own invention. He told me that it was ten times stronger than nitro-glycerine, and that a machine the size of a watch would blow up half a house."

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Charles Pollard, startled by the frightful statement which had just been made to him in a tone of quiet levity, which made even the detective's blood run cold as he listened, "you don't mean to say you would have blown up an English peer in his own house?"

"Why not? What's the odds?" retorted the other, sarcastically. "There is no difference in point of criminality between blowing up a peer and a solicitor, is there? And my German being a Socialist, and on principle opposed to an aristocracy, wished to vindicate his political programme simultaneously with your private one. I can tell you, although for your part of it he has carried off such a nice heavy parcel of her Majesty's handsomest coinage to soothe his disappointment, I could hardly get him to leave the country, he was so vexed at the failure of his combination."

"How was it upset?"

"Well, you see he was watching every movement of the—the party we are speaking of. There were three or four persons engaged in the service, for there is always some uncertainty in these operations, and the German had alternative modes of doing the trick. Your friend, on his way to a certain square, went into a shop in Regent Street. The German followed him, under pretense of asking the price of something, and he saw the showman hand out a little parcel, tied up, which the party put in his pocket. Our friend, who is as quick as lightning, immediately saw his chance. He purchased a small object in the shop, which they wrapped up in their own paper; it happens to be marked with their name. The party was detained a moment having his watch set and paying the bill. Leaving the shop and hastily going into a passage near by, the German set his little machine for half an hour, wrapped it up in the paper he had taken off the object bought in the shop, and going out, beckoned to one of his pals, and instructed him to run after the gentleman who had just come out of the shop, and was going up Regent Street, and say that he had been sent to say they had given him the wrong parcel. The old gent was sharp enough, and

was within an ace of finding out the trick; but it wouldn't have made any matter, for, if he had tried to open the parcel, the machine would have gone off all the same. Being, I suppose, pressed for time, and seeing that the jeweler's name was on the outside of the parcel he concluded it was all right, handed over the one he had received in the shop, and put the other in his pocket. Something went wrong with the machine; it exploded prematurely—killed the commoner and saved one nobleman, though, as the devil would have it, it has, I believe, nearly killed another."

The detective could not notice it, but had he been able to look at the carefully disguised face of Mr. Charles Pollard, he would have seen that horror and disgust were clearly painted upon it, while great drops ran down his forehead and stood out upon his face.

The cool, malignant cynicism of the older criminal had set before the solicitor the wicked transaction in which he had been engaged in a light far more clear and damning than could have been done by the effort of any moralist or religious preacher. The frank, undisguised terms in which the crime was described and qualified made it utterly impossible for Charles Pollard to interpose those euphemisms which, in the experiences of religious casuistry, form a sort of flimsy paper screen between reason and conscience. This ruffian called a spade a spade, and spoke of murder as if it were really to be considered a "fine art," or, at all events, as if for him it had ceased to have any moral meaning or consequence. Mr. Charles Pollard's soul and conscience had never been imbued by nature, or penetrated by means of religion or culture, with those high principles, those pure sentiments and refined sensibilities of right, truth, honor, and integrity which, once transfused through a man's being, there hold their place, because they have become a part of its essence, an element indestructible as the vehicle in which it is contained. Coming, as we have seen, young into a solicitor's office, before his mind had been cultivated or his principles formed by converse with the great spirits of the past, or by contact with other young men of position and education, who are governed at least by such conventional views of right, duty, and morality as are current in every generation, Mr. Charles Pollard had been placed in a very indifferent school of morals. The firm of Pollard & Pollard stood high in the profession in one sense, because of those external qualities which give a great name to such a firm. They were regarded as rich, which placed them above suspicion, and which otherwise is an accident that keeps thousands of men straight who have no natural conscientiousness. It is worth while to keep a good name when one is wealthy; we don't know that it is too cynical to say in the present state of society it is not worth while if one be poor. They were known to be sharp, keen, hard men of business, flinching before no obstacle, resolute to win. When lawyers get that reputation, they inspire a respect akin to fear. They were first-class lawyers; they, and their chief clerk, and their common-law clerks, and their chancery clerks, knew every turn and wrinkle of practice, a statement that could not be made of one firm in twenty of those who pretend to guide the affairs of their fellow-citizens through the dismal maze of the English law. They had a large aristocratic and banking connection which made them

socially and financially powerful; the extent of their information regarding the private affairs of so many influential people gave them an incalculable moral and practical advantage in the profession. Most solicitors who had to fight Pollard & Pollard began the struggle with a consciousness of being at a disadvantage.

In the hurry of legal practice, the very judges are inadvertently affected by the repute of the firms engaged in the cases they have to decide upon, especially at chambers, where now so much of the business is done, and where the result of the interlocutory proceedings may have an important influence on the fortunes of a suit. There a simple statement made in the name of Pollard & Pollard would often weigh more with a judge than an affidavit from the other side.

It must necessarily be so. In the majority of cases the judge, who has practiced at the bar before he sat upon the bench, knows that the real facts are not before him. He does his best to ferret them out, but he is too often driven to make a hasty generalization of the probabilities. In such a case the standing and good name of the attorneys who are wrangling before him are inevitably thrown into the scale. The judge is human; he can not help it. He is unconsciously biased in favor of respectability, and in nine cases out of ten justly. The tenth man is the victim of that chance which governs the affairs of the world. The highest degree to which human jurisprudence can ever hope to attain is to reduce the proportion of the blunders of justice to below twenty per cent of the cases adjudicated upon.

Let a firm of solicitors once acquire this reputation for sharpness, shrewdness, and success, they are bound to maintain it. But they can not always be on the right side. The largest proportion of affairs which come within the range of a lawyer's practice are the affairs of dishonest people. In every case one side or the other is wrong; in most cases one or the other party is consciously wrong. When litigants are sincerely desirous to know and to do what is just, they generally manage to come to terms. Hence Pollard & Pollard must very often have been on the wrong side in the eye of a moralist, while in the eye of a man of business and of English morality they were bound by their duty to their client, and by their reputation, to leave no stone unturned to win. In such a case men are obliged to turn over many dirty stones, and in doing so must soil their fingers. They wipe them on the clean towel of their reputation, and the world never sees the stains, which seem to be absorbed and disappear. Now and then, at the touch of a chemical called publicity, they come out again black and foul.

For a youth whose moral character is yet to be molded the atmosphere of such an office is not the best that could be selected. It is charged with injurious influences. There are no gross, flagrant immoralities, but there are all the daily, hourly, petty tricks and struggles to get the better of the other side throughout the prolonged and complicated proceedings of a suit. Such a case, admitted to be a bad one, is being fought simply to gain time—another by Dives against Davus is prolonged to force the poorer to a settlement from sheer want of funds. The directors of a great railway, who have deliberately and intentionally charged too high a rate for

transport of goods, are at length sued by some unfortunate man who is more obstinate than wise, and is fool enough to credit the maxim of the English law that "there is no wrong without a remedy." Their directions to their solicitor are very simple:

"He wants to go to law. Give him a bellyful. We will fight the case to the House of Lords. He is not good for £5000."

By the time he has finished with the lords-justices our chivalric suitor is in the Bankruptcy Court, or compromises the case to save himself a disagreeable visit to Mr. Brougham. It is not possible for men who act as the agents in such transactions to have very elevated moral sentiments, though they may in all other matters live and behave as if they had them. Habit has put a blind side on the conscience, just as the "custom of trade" is a screen which hides many of their own iniquities from the eyes of merchants who are monuments of philanthropy and pillars of religion.

The air that Mr. Charles Pollard breathed, while his character was in course of formation, was unhealthy. He was taking in moral poison as unconsciously, but not less surely, than the victim who absorbs the unseen, insidious organisms which propagate a cholera or a typhoid. And just as in such diseases the germs may be harmlessly absorbed and their presence never manifest itself, so, had not circumstances been favorable, he might have lived and died without developing the moral *microbes* which had secretly fastened on the vitals of his soul. But the favorable conditions of development were unhappily created. The disease began slowly to do its work.

He had been struck, in going carefully over the papers of the deceased Earl of Tilbury, by the astounding success of that shrewd and lucky peer in his speculations in stocks. Charmed and dazed by the colossal figures of the wealth which was detailed before his eyes, covetousness entered into his soul. The earl's combination in the Stockton railway shares particularly fascinated the solicitor. He resolved to have his part in it. It was a secret which had been well kept, and which was only disclosed to Mr. Pollard in professional confidence. He bought largely and held the shares. They steadily went up. He sold too soon, but at an immense profit. Having once bitten, he bit again. This time the hook caught him. He had been advised to sell for a fall; the shares continued to rise, though the general market went down. In fact, the movement foreseen by the earl and Mr. Pinxton went on unchecked. The American group were gradually absorbing the stock. Thus Mr. Charles Pollard and his uncle, who had been made acquainted with the success of the earlier ventures, found themselves in a serious position. They were "short" of a large quantity of Stocktons, and were effectively "cornered." To have bought them in would have run the shares up to an impossible figure and have ruined the firm. In this extremity the moral poison which might have lain dormant through a long and successful life developed its presence. They "borrowed" the shares belonging to the Tilbury estate. To do so it was necessary to forge the name of the executor. The alternative was very sharply defined. It was that or ruin. Pollard & Pollard would have been forced to lie in the mud and be danced on merrily by the sensational reporters and the big-wigs of the Law

Association. The deed was done. Other deeds followed. They were on the fatal Avernian slide. How far had they not descended?

And yet Mr. Charles Pollard, listening to the cynical wretch who was the purchased agent of his guilt, shuddered with a very sincere horror at the heartless levity and coolness of the manner in which the latter discussed things which the solicitor—his principal—would have liked to wrap up in the silver paper of euphemism, and so make it more palatable to his queasy conscience. Not that he regretted what he had done—it had been done deliberately, as an act of necessity—but that he could not yet regard it with the callous indifference exhibited by his infamous agent. Hence his disgust had almost assumed the character of a moral reaction. Much of the moral indignation of the world is of about the same quality, though occasionally it may be a little higher in degree.

The disguised solicitor could not help expressing the feeling which had risen in his gorge. He cleared his throat and began,

"Captain—"

"Captain what, now? D—n it, man, will you drop your infernal affectation? I'm not a client. If you don't care for your own neck, I tell you, I do for mine. It's lucky the fellow in the next box is as dead drunk as a hoghshead in bond. Well, what were you going to remark, my ingenious Quack of Quarrels?"

This irreverent gibe at his professional honor and dignity seemed to offend the solicitor more seriously than other remarks had done which were simply at the expense of his moral character. So it is often to be observed that men will bear with complacency jokes at the expense of their personal purity, while they will deeply resent any reflection on their political or professional or commercial standing. He manifested his displeasure with indiscreet emphasis.

"Whatever your name is, then, I tell you, you are a perfect devil!"

"Ta-ta! my worthy pal and patron—alliterative, don't you see? Never mind calling names. I touched you there in a soft place—eh? *Quack of Quarrels!* Ha, ha! 'Pon my word, now I think of it, d—d good! Another alliteration by G—! Who says a man must not laugh at his own joke? Ha, ha, ha! And look you, my worthy pal and patron—when you talk of me in such terms I should like to know what the devil you call yourself—eh? There's a maxim in your own profession—though you don't know the classics you may understand what it means—*Qui facit per alium facit per se.* Now if I am a devil and do devil's work, I should like to know what my employer is."

The sophism was ingenious, and quite sufficient to silence Mr. Pollard.

From the man's tone and manner, the listening detective judged that the contents of a bottle which stood between the Master of Arts and the solicitor had begun to produce some effect, and he hoped now to obtain more specific information; but the speaker, suddenly becoming aware that he had elevated his voice, dropped it, and said a few words which it was impossible to overhear. The detective, however, thought he could distinguish the words "money"—"yacht"—"swift and sure"—"steam up."

Mr. Charles Pollard now also spoke in a low and earnest tone.

The listener strained his ear to the utmost, but he could only now and then catch a word, like "thousand"—"police"—"inquiries"—"throw them off the track." At length he overheard these words distinctly uttered by the disguised solicitor:

"I am assured that the police have no suspicion as to the identity."

"No matter," said the other. "I want to get away from this. You must fork out that last four thou. Our German friend took two with him, and I have spent the rest among our pals who helped us about those letters to the police. It's been a tidy job, I can tell you. It will take them a year in Scotland Yard to unravel all those yarns. Now I want to know whether you're ready to come down with the dust?"

"Really Mr. —my dear sir—you are too *exijong*! I brought you this to-night"—there was a movement, and a transfer of something which gave out a delicate metallic sound—"there are a thousand of them there. I really think you ought to be content with this for the present."

"Look here, damme!" retorted the other, savagely, and dropping his careless, cynical tone for one which was full of sinister meaning—"no more humbug with me. Are you going to do it, or are you not?"

"And suppose I don't!" said the solicitor, with a sudden flash of anger and obstinacy. "What can you do?"

"Supposing you don't?" said the other, with a ferocious laugh. "Why, only this, that in a few hours a full account of the whole business will be in the hands of—you know who; they will be glad enough to purchase the evidence of some one who is not a principal, and you will swing for it—that's all, my Quack of Quarrels. Ha!"

The detective imagined that a deadly pallor spread over the other's face, and that the threat had its effect, for after a pause he could hear a voice, strangely muffled and trembling with emotion, say,

"Very well. You shall have it to-morrow night."

"Come, now, that's more reasonable. You can't expect people to risk their necks in your business for a few beggarly hundreds. Three thou.—down on the nail to-morrow night—and no backing out, or—" The speaker substituted some expressive gesture for the words. "And look here, we'll change the venue. We've met here often enough. What do you say to running down to Gravesend to-morrow night, and meeting me at the 'Three Tuns'? In disguise of course. We can go on board and settle it there. Come down dressed as a swell, and go on board as my friend."

At this moment a slim, beggarly-looking fellow, who had glided up the room unperceived by the two conspirators or by the spy, who kept his face down upon his arms, touched the broad-shouldered man and whispered a few words to him in the *argot* of the criminal class, which evidently created a little sensation in the mind of the Master of Arts. After exchanging a few sentences rapidly with the new-comer, the latter shambled away to the other end of the room, and the ex-University man said,

"There's a bobby been roving about at the end of the street for an hour, and he's evidently on the lookout for somebody. But I

have every street watched. We had better go. Here's a back door and private exit close on the left. We won't wait to pay the reckoning. Sally Blair knows me. We must file. I'll put you in a way to get round to your old-clo' shop. Quick."

He made a dart through a door cut in the wainscoting, and which would ordinarily have passed unnoticed. The other followed him, forgetting, in his excitement, the limp which belonged to his disguise.

The detective glanced round. No one seemed to have taken any notice of the exit of the two men. He hesitated a moment. He was unarmed. There was no doubt that the gang engaged in this business was a clever and desperate one. He had no idea whither that door might lead. But it was of first-rate importance that he should find out who this redoubtable rascal was who spoke of murder as coolly as a butcher would speak of his benevolent occupation. Professional ambition, and the desire to have the credit of unwinding this horrible plot, got the better of his discretion. He suddenly rose, and in two steps he had passed through the door. He found himself in a long corridor, imperfectly lit by a dull sort of twilight, which emanated from behind a small ground-glass window pierced in the wall on the right. He could hear no sound except a loud snoring, which proceeded from the room behind the glass. At the end was a door. He stepped along quickly and silently. The door was shut by a spring-lock, opening by a key from the outside, and easily slipped back by a knob from within. In another moment he was in the open air. Around him was a large, damp, dirty yard, partly filled with old iron, old rags, tarpaulins, ends of ropes, and such gear. A moment earlier and he would have been perceived. Two figures were just passing out of a gate-way at the extreme end of the yard. Beyond it could be seen a dark, flashing current, with here and there a light floating on it, and the irregular groups and lines of lamps on the Surrey side of the river. Cautiously making his way to the gate, he put his head out. Two figures were walking along a low path, or rather, a sort of broken and slimy causeway, which led along the shore. He hesitated for a moment, took out a whistle, and actually put it in his mouth. The men were proceeding in the opposite direction from the street where the policeman, his rear-guard, was waiting for his signal. But he changed his purpose, pocketed the whistle, and began to follow the retreating figures, taking advantage of every door-way of projection to hide his movements. At length they disappeared in the gloom. Hastening his steps, he found, as he expected, that a narrow lane led up to the main thoroughfare. The form of one man only could be dimly discerned at the other end, about thirty yards off. It vanished, limping round the corner. The detective listened. There was no movement, no sign of the second person. After waiting a few minutes he heard a step on the causeway behind him. He resolved to give up the chase, and proceeded slowly up the middle of the narrow lane. He had not taken ten steps when his neck was seized with a powerful grip from behind and the cold muzzle of a pistol pressed on his temple.

"Utter a sound, and you are a dead man!" said a voice, which he recognized as that of Mr. Charles Pollard's companion.

At the same instant a match was struck. It flared up for a moment on four faces, two directly opposite the unfortunate detective, one at his side, and one his own, ghastly with sudden fear. Four gleaming eyes were fixed for a moment on his features, and suddenly glared with ferocious intelligence as one cried, in a hoarse whisper,

"McLaren!"

Simultaneously the match went out; two long knives were plunged up to the hilt in the detective's breast, and, with a long sigh, he fell to the ground a corpse.

"He will tell no tales now!" said the principal, calmly. "What the h— did he come down poking round here for, I should like to know?"

CHAPTER XII.

A CHANGE OF TACTICS.

THE business of the great firm of Pollard & Pollard was carried on as briskly and feverishly as ever. Clients and solicitors, clerks and messengers, came and went, like the tides, in perpetual flux and reflux, bringing in and carrying away from this great and busy center of legal affairs heavy freights of the products of legal ingenuity—writs, summonses, notices of action, notices of applications, notices to do this, notices not to do that, notices to swear the other thing: notices in the Common Law Division, and notices in the Chancery Division of the High Court of Justice, or in Bankruptcy, or in the County or Palatine Courts; interrogatories and answers to interrogatories; draft affidavits and sworn affidavits, affidavits of service and non-service, affidavits in answer to affidavits made in support of affidavits, and affidavits that there were no affidavits; briefs of title-deeds, draft-deeds; wills and drafts of wills; briefs for counsel to advise, to settle, to appear—for counsel to attend and consent, for counsel to attend and oppose; opinion of counsel, draft documents of every kind for the stationer or the printer; and in the middle of all this paper flutter and agitation, all this bandying to and fro of parchments, all this come and go of busy, eager, anxious, joyous, troubled, victorious, beaten, combative, satisfied and disappointed crowd of clients, attorneys and clerks a small knot of employés taking notes of every scrap of paper that went in and out, of every moment devoted to any business by any one in the establishment, from the senior partner to the messenger boys—of every visit and visitor; jotting it all down carefully, minute by minute, in registers, which, by and by to be consulted by trained intelligence, would evolve the golden "particulars" of that masterpiece of iniquity, a lawyer's bill.

Whatever agitation might disturb the breasts of the partners in this great firm, business must be done. They must receive their clients, supervise and direct the numberless proceedings which were always running on and constantly spinning themselves into a tangle, devote their personal attention to confidential interviews and correspondence, be ever quick, alert, sharp, clear, cool, sure—and sometimes gay. It may readily be imagined that of late neither of the

Messrs. Pollard had found themselves quite up to these varied requirements of their troublesome profession. The past few years of weary and feverish struggle with fortune had aged them both very visibly. Their clerks and professional brethren had noticed it, and said they were too successful, and worked too hard. Judicious friends had counseled them to take in a partner or partners, but they did not seem to be inclined to share their anxieties with any partner. Their doctors had warned them that too much brain-work was dangerous, which was like telling a consumptive patient in a shipwreck that it will injure him to swim.

Mr. Charles Pollard's earlier speculations, when he had taken his cue from the papers of the deceased Earl of Tilbury, had been remarkably brilliant and successful in their results. So much so that on the strength of them the partners had purchased a large building estate, which had proved a very heavy drag on their resources, for as is well known to those who have tried it, the motto of a building estate is exactly the reverse of "small profits, quick returns." The profits must be very large to fill in the blood which is being drawn out of the body by the ever-sucking leech called "Interest," and the returns are generally spread over a long series of years. And Messrs. Pollards' building speculation had not been a happy one. It was not, however, generally known that they were interested in it. Solicitors rarely invest in their own name, and they were supposed to be acting for an unnamed client. Moreover, encouraged by their primary success, Mr. Charles Pollard had bought a handsome but expensive property in Kent, where amateur hop-growing and improvements and building had swallowed up what amounted to a very fair fortune. And lastly, luck had not held firm in his gambling in Copthall Court; and the more he plunged to redeem his losses, the deeper had he sunk in the horrible quicksands of the Stock Exchange. Thus, a firm whose resources a few years before could have been counted in hundreds of thousands, and all in good lands, houses, or mortgages, had been reduced, at the time when our history opens to the most precarious expedients for keeping their business on foot and for answering to their engagements. Some of those expedients have already been disclosed, others hinted at. From a desperate situation to a desperate expedient is only a short step, and once upon the fatal slide the steps grow long and quick. The first ones, taken with shrinking shame, soon changed into firm, resolute plunges into fraud and crime.

When men who have been honorable, and respected for their business shrewdness and capacity, become criminals, they carry, of course, into their criminal conduct all the qualities which gave them distinction in affairs. They become *criminels d'élite*. The work they turn out is neater, more perfect, and finer than that of the vulgar operator. All the acuteness of intelligence, all the comprehensive grasp of conditions and requirements, all the untiring energy and quick, constant circumspection which made them great in business, will make them masters in crime. In reading the history of the Middle Ages, when the distinctions between crime and innocence were not so sharply defined as they have since become, and the greatest men made it a study, with marked success, to be distinguished criminals, we are all able to perceive to how high a stand-

ard of excellence in execution and results crime may be elevated. In more modern days, men like Redpath and Bontoux have made crime interesting, and even romantic, by the masterly intelligence they have displayed in the commission of it.

Thus Pollard & Pollard transferred to their nefarious operations all the trained skill in legal practice, all the knowledge of law, all the shrewd, hard cunning, all the cold-blooded calmness of judgment and inflexibility of action—in fine, as we have said, all the qualities which had made them eminent solicitors. Add to this the verve which enters into men's actions when their life, their property, and their standing before their fellow-men are in danger, and we have the making of a very dangerous criminal association.

The task, therefore, which lay before Mr. Sontag and the Earl of Selby and George Barton was a redoubtable one. Two able villains with their backs to the wall, resolved to die hard and to hesitate at nothing, had to be surprised and captured, so that justice might be done upon them.

After that interview with the earl related in the sixth chapter of this history, they had held a prolonged and agitated conference. His attitude during that interview had surprised them. Subtle and practiced as they were in critical discussions, where the object is to disclose nothing to the other side and to extract everything, that attitude had, moreover, somewhat confused them.

Knowing how serious a matter it was for the earl that the questionable transaction with Lady Tilbury into which they had entrapped him should be covered up, and having, unfortunately for themselves, formed a very exaggerated idea of the breach which they imagined had been created between the earl and his agent by the disclosure of the facts, they had really fancied—as the peer, with remarkable acuteness, had begun to suspect—that he would be gratified by the disappearance of this troublesome intermeddler. The elder Barton, they knew, was introduced into the business at the special request of the Earl of Tilbury; and the Earl of Selby, in notifying them that he was not in a position to refuse the request, had expressed his chagrin at it. But Pollard & Pollard did not know how the attitude assumed by the elder Barton when the earl made his confession to him had reconciled the peer to the intervention which he had previously dreaded so much. Besides, they were not conscious to how great an extent their own moral status had been lowered by their criminal practices, and they were unable accurately to measure the distance between the act which the earl had committed once, and deeply repented of, and the crime which they had incited in order to cover up that and their other delinquencies. This blindness of criminals to moral effects and consequences, this incapacity for measuring the moral standards of others, is one of the most salient evidences of that distortion of the entire nature which results from evil-doing. The earl's suspicion was correct. The two partners had delicately felt the ground in order to see whether Lord Selby, who would profit, as they thought, by the crime, could not be drawn into the combination to veil it from the eyes of justice.

But to their astonishment and terror, the earl did not catch at the bait which was so cunningly thrown to him. He had suddenly, of

his own motion, rejected the idea that George Barton the elder had disappeared with the bonds, or because, as they had suggested, his own accounts were not in order. He had protested against that clever move of theirs—the insertion of an advertisement offering a reward for information and for papers which were in their own hands, with the view of diverting from themselves a suspicion against which, as they ought to have remembered, their standing and reputation was a perfect guarantee. Still more were they disturbed by the earl's proposal to offer a reward for the murderers so soon as he was satisfied that George Barton had been murdered. And the last deadly stroke to their self-possession was struck when they learned that, after all, the damning evidence was not suppressed, for George Barton's son knew all that they supposed had been carried alone in the breast of their victim. In advertising as they had done, they had reckoned without that. They knew the elder Barton was as close as an iron safe. Who could have suspected that he would make a confidant of a young man twenty-three years of age in a matter involving the character of a peer of the realm and an eminent firm of solicitors?

"I never heard of such a thing!" said Mr. Joseph Pollard, trembling with virtuous indignation. "Such a breach of confidence—so unprofessional! I couldn't have believed it of George Barton, if you had sworn it to me on the Bible!" This was addressed, of course, to his nephew and associate.

There was no doubt whatever that, in this instance at least, the high moral indignation of the senior partner was sincere; and very likely all the professional brethren of Mr. George Barton, senior, who read this history, will consider that a serious blot rests upon his memory. Nor do we propose to defend his conduct, except on the ground that, had he behaved more circumspectly, a great deal of the romantic interest of this history would have been lost.

The two partners made an odd pair of criminals. Mr. Joseph was old and experienced, Mr. Charles was young and clever.

The elder, trained in the old-fashioned school of the profession, when suits pursued the quiet tenor of their way year after year, and business was transacted by the great firms with a certain majestic dignity and repose, was a sound, careful, practical lawyer, rather disturbed in his balance by the new-fangled, hurried methods of procedure, but cool, accurate, unimpressionable. The younger had all the faults and characteristics of the modern school. He was quick, keen, alert, not profound in his law, but making up for his ignorance by the rapidity of his intuitions and appreciations; as versatile, as impressionable as a poet while he was as shrewd and voracious as an usurer.

There was a physical difference, as we have already intimated, between the two men, which corresponded with the distinctions of their character. One was tall, thin, and active, the other was of middle size, square figure, and deliberate movement. George Sand, in one of her books, "Le Beau Laurence," makes one of those remarks, at once quaint and profound, with which her pages are starred. She says: "*Ceux dont l'œil étendu embrasse tout, sont plastiques; au contraire, ceux qui ont besoin de regarder de près,*

sont specialistes." Charles Pollard, though he carried glasses from affectation, had an eye as keen and quick as a hawk's, and it was his nature to be influenced by the immense variety of objects which came within his horizon. The elder man was, and always had been, short-sighted. Without his glasses the few forms which came within the narrow circle of his vision were generalized. He was, as George Sand says, "a specialist." He mastered everything which came within his range; he never speculated as to what lay beyond it. How much came to be drawn by the lighter forces of his nephew into the direful ways which they were now jointly pursuing is one of those problems of the human character which defy the subtlest analysis. It is roughly explained by the simple word "money;" but even in an age when money is the supreme controller, purchaser, and guarantor of success, that does not sufficiently explain the aberration of this mediocre but practical intellect. We must look deeper, and examine the moral principles in which those who make successful men of business are initiated, to find the key to this puzzle.

When Mr. Charles Pollard had descended upon the arena of the Stock Exchange, he was brought into association with some very strange characters. Among the brokers and the jobbers he found a good many of the riff-raff and rejections of all professions. This one had been a guardsman, that a lawyer, that a Dissenting preacher, that a solicitor—struck off the rolls. There were barristers who had been briefless, and there were bankrupt merchants and commission agents; there were ancient venders of old clothes and Levantine fruits, and Spaniards and Greeks who had dealt in slaves; there were broken-down actors and ex-journalists; a jovial crew, among whom walked the graver and more honorable operators and brokers: doing business with them? oh yes! but holding up the tails of their coats to preserve them from contamination, sometimes even obliged to shake hands with their vulgar and dubious associates—but then one's hands can be washed. The spots on one's clothes are sometimes not so easy to take out, and the clothes make the man.

The crew, however, leads a jolly life. Money comes and goes quickly with it. Many of these men who won and spent their money with almost royal ease, had their little establishments at Brighton and elsewhere, generally in the environs of London, where, with a luxurious interior, a well-filled cellar, and a pretty woman, with extensive associations among the *élite* of the *demi-monde* and the vastly-increasing circle of "artistes" and actresses, they went their way of feverish folly with complete abandonment. Into this strange world, existing completely apart and by itself, existing—yet hardly suspected by the millions which surround it—with its own manners, and customs, its own higher and lower circles, its own language, and its special rules and ideas of morality, Mr. Charles Pollard, still young, and only freshly emancipated, had been first introduced, under a disguise, by an obliging broker, and had gradually made his way until he had become familiar with all its secrets. By this means he had been brought into contact, from time to time, with very doubtful characters; for if the *demi-monde* holds on with one hand to the aristocracy, its other is clasped by

criminals and swindlers. Thus he had come to hear mysteriously, among some of the confidences exchanged in this free-and-easy society, of every class and of no class, of wealthy parvenus seeking a distraction, wild young aristocrats giving loose play to their passions, gamblers of every description—of the turf, the Stock Exchange, and the private hells, or so-called clubs—wine merchants, money-lenders, forgers, swindlers, thieves, all mixed up together, all preying on each other and on society, and all connected, by lines more or less loose, with a marvelous variety of adventuresses, who introduced into this strange medley all the elements of romance and all the *bizarreries* of perverted sentiment—he had come, I say, to hear, now and then, mysterious hints given and taken that in certain emergencies Brooks or Yates or Levy or Rigaud or Van Pool "was your man." Things were spoken of openly before him which, as a solicitor, compromised him by the very knowledge of them—transactions were boasted of that were more than questionable—and allusions were made which proved that some of these gay associates did not always keep themselves within the strict limits of the laws of the realm. This initiation had been very gradual, for Mr. Charles Pollard's first excursions into the outer edges of this circle of folly had been timorous and circumspect. He had even learned to be ingenious in disguises, and only one or two brokers, who were sufficiently interested in preserving his secrets, knew of the identity of this occasional apparition in the *coulisses* of society with the partner of one of the great legal firms. It was in this way that Mr. Charles Pollard came to form the acquaintance of men whom he could engage for any illegitimate purpose, by the use of that argentine persuasive of which he had an unlimited control.

This brief explanation may suffice, without penetrating more deeply into the secrets of this society, to explain to the reader how the solicitor came to find agents ready to his hand for his criminal purposes.

He had met a man known as "Captain" Tom Yates, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, of gentlemanly address and manners, except when he was thrown off his balance by drink or bad luck, who showed by his conversation and accent that he had been well educated, and brought up in good society. This man was in every way mysterious. Sometimes he was to be seen in the City, mixed up in some of the thousand and one projects for extracting money from the trustful public which take the name of "public companies," and express themselves in prospectuses and articles of association. In this character he had been concerned in not a few successful, and many disastrous "issues," and had found himself cheek by jowl with some of the great financiers of the City. He was well known at a couple of clubs at the West End, where high play was secretly carried on, and on one occasion was brought into unpleasant notice by a scandal arising out of the loss of several thousand pounds by a stranger introduced at the Melton Club, and severely pillaged at what was alleged to be whist. For this the committee, so soon as public attention had been drawn to the matter through the police-courts, had invited him to resign; an invitation he accepted. He was a first-class billiard-player, though he never showed his best form, which was only known to one or two markers; but

he played regularly at his remaining club and in two well-known saloons, and made a very respectable living in this way alone. He always seemed to be able to command plenty of money for his vices, though the "means" were anything but "visible." He was seen occasionally at Paris, at Nice, at Cannes, at Monaco, rarely playing, always mysterious, and now and then at Pesth, where there is a noted *café* in the Radial Strasse, which is said to be an international mart or exchange of valuables, whose holders have private reasons for not openly exposing their identity. In fact Mr. Yates was one of those curious nondescripts, abounding in London, who live on the outer edge of gentlemen's society, are never admitted to that of any honorable woman, and are treated with a certain toleration by people who feel that, if they are *suspectible*, there are no actual proofs of malfeasance to be produced against them. What he was, however, in the intimacy of private friendship the reader has already seen. Captain Yates was the companion of Mr. Charles Pollard at the Dutch Lugger.

Mr. Charles, ignorant of the tragedy which had taken place a few minutes after he had departed from the captain on the previous night, and little imagining what grave events were in pickle for him during the day that had dawned, arrived at his office in somewhat better spirits than he had exhibited for some time. The captain was a "hard nail," he admitted to himself, but then nothing was too dear which assured to Pollard & Pollard immunity from ruin and the hangman. He did not grude eight or ten thousand pounds for that. Schultz was out of the reach of the police, another good job; for, if he had been caught on the other charge, he was quite capable of trying to arrange a little bargain for gentlemanly treatment on condition of disclosing the plot against Mr. Barton. The missing documents were in the wine-cellar of his country house, at the bottom of his oldest bin of port, which looked as if it had not been disturbed for years.

But Mr. Charles did not find his more sedate uncle and partner at all in a humor to share his superficial content. On the contrary, Mr. Joseph Pollard looked atrabilious; and as to the weather inside, with him the barometer was down to "very stormy." He had been reflecting with all his specialist intensity, and in the limited circle of his practical vision everything looked gloomy and threatening. His lips were blue, and trembled as he spoke. He had come in a little later than his nephew, who was busily reading the morning's correspondence. He listened in silence to Charles's naïve report, and shook his head.

"Charlie," he said, "there is no use concealing from ourselves that we are in a very perilous position. I dare say you are right—those fellows are safe enough, simply because their heads are in pawn. That is not where our danger lies. We made a great mistake in issuing that advertisement before we had committed Selby to it. Now where are we? Young Barton, the earl says, knows everything—if old Barton told him one thing, he told him all. He knows about the dealing with the shares—a bad business, Charlie—the beginning of all our troubles; he knows about the receipt, possibly has it in his possession; he knows about that hundred thousand pounds, though, thank Heaven! that's arranged for. Now,

you see, even if the earl had been willing to keep silent about the nature of those documents, provided we had made the loss good and covered up all these transactions, young Barton won't allow it to remain quiet, because he will want to clear the old man's memory. The police will be down upon us at once for a list of them—I wonder they haven't been here for it already—then they will go to the Countess of Tilbury for explanations, and then the whole business is out. We shall have to explain the transactions—the earl won't back us up—he'll square it with the Tilburys and let the cat out of the bag. Of course, his character will suffer, but what is that to a peer of the realm, especially when those most interested will do everything to hush it up? Then we shall be asked to explain the theory we have put forward of George Barton's disappearance and embezzlement. It will be hinted that it was our interest to get rid of him to cover up our own defalcations—"

"Yes; but, my dear uncle, what evidence is there? You are going on a number of hypotheses which are far from probable. Old Barton had that receipt in his pocket-book — mark my words. Whatever he told young Barton about us is not evidence. We can easily explain away that matter of account."

"Possibly. But the shares—the certificates. If the old man told him about that, he can get the evidence of the forgery and the transfers from New York."

"Hum! There is something in that"

"There is a good deal in it!" cried the old man, pettishly. "It's the very devil, sir! That fellow Sontag will probe the whole business to the bottom."

"They can't get any proof that we had anything to do with—the —hem—"

"No, they may not be able to do that, but is it not bad enough to stand in the dock on a charge of forgery, Charles Pollard?" the old man almost shouted, while the perspiration started from his brow and glistened on his pale face. "I tell you we're in a trap, sir—in a devil of a mess—and I think the sooner we can get a few thousands together and get out of this the better. Ah! I believe my old grandmother was right after all. She was always repeating that old saw, 'Be sure your sin will find you out.'"

"Bah! my dear uncle," said Charles Pollard, thoroughly alarmed by the evident break-down of this strong man's nerve and spirit. "That is only true of the weak operators. Look at all the men we know who are at the top of the tree in the City! Do you suppose they all got there by a strict adherence to the Ten Commandments? That's a proverb out of date—never was true, I believe—certainly ain't in these days. *Noos avong chongjay toot sela!* It's not quite so bad as all that yet. Let us consider what we really have to meet, and try to find out our exact position. Lord Selby is not going to risk letting the cat out of the bag in order to save the reputation of a deceased agent. That was all moonshine—his threat to offer a reward for the discovery of Barton's thingummies, you know. Suppose he does? What odds? We can always double their bids. No one suspects us of that. As to the shares, until we know positively that young Barton is possessed of that information, it would be madness for us to act upon the supposition that he is.

Then the earl is in our hands. He can not prove—unless Barton has the receipt—that those documents ever came into our possession. Well, that is the second thing to find out, we must see young Barton, on pretense of helping him to solve the problem of his father's fate. And then—but no!—look here, egad!"—he snapped his fingers—"why didn't we think of it before? The earl objected to the advertisement! Well, withdraw the advertisement! Reproduce the papers—old Barton, you remember, inspected them on Wednesday. Say we were under the impression he took them away, and that we have found them lying among a mass of documents on our table—overlooked, but happily safe! We thought that, in the absence of the documents, we should be able to squeeze the earl. The earl won't squeeze. Reproduce the papers and the bonds—"

"And what about the share certificate?" said Mr. Joseph Pollard, dryly.

"We must run the risk of that. What additional harm is done if they know already? If they don't know, we're all right. The bold game is the only one for us now!"

"Where are the papers? Suppose the earl comes here to-day—he will want to see them—we couldn't refuse."

"By Jove! How unlucky! They are down in the wine-cellar at Stevenham. What's the time? There's an express at 10.30. I can just catch it. I shall be there at 11.37. Telegraph to Tom to meet me at the station with a trap—with Samson—he goes like the wind. I can catch the up express at 12.20, and be here before 2.00. Look here. You keep out of the way. Go down to the Westminster Hotel to that arbitration, and lie *perdoo* till after lunch. Just take a look at those letters before you go, and send a note at once to the police withdrawing the advertisement. I'm off!"

And the younger partner went off like a rocket.

CHAPTER XIII.

A VISIT.—MR. SONTAG'S THEORIES ON SOCIALISM AND CRIME.

WEARY as he was, and worn out by excitement, grief, and want of rest, George Barton found it impossible, when he had left the earl, to quiet the activity of his brain, which continued to work with the restive and feverish monotony of a telegraphic instrument, transmitting thoughts equally rapid and various. He had seen and spoken with Lady Blanche. His heart was thrilled with the electric influences of her look, her voice, her touch. Amid the somber terrors that environed his soul, this solitary beacon gleamed fair and luminous far, far off, but still flashing some faint rays of hope. Again and again his thoughts turned to her, and his memory recalled, with minute fondness, every incident, every glance, every movement, every gesture, the expression, the tone, the accent of her voice during those two brief but precious interviews. The gloomy realities of life were forgotten while he lost himself in these trances of sentiment. But when he turned to those realities, reviewing the grave events of the day, pondering on his father's fate, or considering his own situation, the darkness only seemed to grow

more and more profound and impenetrable. He was a young man, but one of extraordinary power and resolve; still he vainly strove to shake off the dismal influences which closed in upon his soul with dense and suffocating effect, shutting out every prospect of happiness. So dreadful did the darkness appear all round the mental horizon that he would fain have shut his eyes to it and ceased to think at all. But that was not possible. Like the anxious mariner he felt obliged to strain every sense in order to discover some way out of the horrible obscurity by which he was surrounded. His interview with the Earl of Selby, while it showed him more clearly the position of the rocks and shoals among which he was navigating, only served to involve him in thicker clouds of doubt and embarrassment. The painful dilemma to which he had hitherto endeavored to shut his eyes was now sharply defined. To vindicate the memory of his father, as he was determined to do, was to ruin the earl, and strike a blow at Lady Blanche's happiness and peace of mind—the maiden whom he hopelessly, but, as he knew by the pangs and pleasures of his heart, madly loved. There seemed to be no middle way, and each of the devious courses seemed to end in darkness and sorrow. How could he, he asked himself, sacrifice his father's memory to insuring his own happiness, were that even open to him? And with all the illusory hopes love whispers or engenders his reason warned him that was out of the question. The satisfaction of his desires could not be attained by treason to the supreme commands of duty. Had he been a religious man, and therefore a casuist, it would have been whispered to his soul that mercy is better than judgment; and he might have found an excuse for avoiding the discharge of an unpleasant duty by a sacrifice of truth, of justice, and his father's honor. But he was too well grounded in the pure, clear, simple ethics of nature to be led astray by old-fashioned scholastic sophistry of that kind.

Then if he turned, and simply glancing along the other course, caught a glimpse of the dread certainties to which it conducted—the innocent suffering with the guilty—the beloved one sinking to the earth under an intolerable burden of shame and sorrow—can any one wonder that he shuddered, averted his eyes, and shrunk from the prospect opened up before him? A few hours since he had seen her in all her queenly beauty, proud, but tender and sympathetic—and that to him!—unconscious of the heavy clouds which were hanging over her father's head, that lofty, unstricken head, clouds charged with the flames and bolts of justice; and there, by a strange fatality, he to whom she had spoken words of comfort and kindness held it in his power, and deemed it to be his duty, to do an act which would make those clouds discharge their ruin upon those she loved.

"Oh," he cried out aloud, as he paced his room with uncertain steps, "it is a horrible dilemma. I think I shall go mad!'

And a horrible dilemma it was. The ghastly paleness of his face, the hollow sinking of his dark eyes in their sockets, and the nervous contraction of his hands, seemed to verify his fear.

Morning had almost dawned (for him as for her, each keeping a late and troubled vigil) before he calmed down, and overcome by physical weakness, threw himself, dressed as he was, on his bed.

He was aroused from an uneasy slumber by a loud knocking at

his door. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly ten o'clock. His laundress usually came at eight, and he was vexed to think that she must have knocked in vain and been obliged to go away. However, concluding that she had returned in the hope of rousing him, he opened the door, his hair and dress in disorder, his eyes bloodshot and haggard.

Lord Charles Layton was standing outside with the laundress. Both their faces showed considerable anxiety.

"Why, good gracious, Barton," cried the young lord, seizing his hand and wringing it with tremendous energy, "I never was more glad to see you in my life, though you never looked worse! This good woman here and I have been knocking for more than ten minutes. We were sure that something had happened to you, and were just going to send for a porter to break in your door. You are ill, Barton; your hand is quite hot."

"It is nothing," said Barton. "I did not get to bed till five o'clock, and you see I lay down just as I was. You know how troubled I am."

"Yes," said Lord Charles, as he put his arm through his friend's, and entered his sitting-room. "I know it, George; and I should have been here before but for my father's orders, given for some mysterious reason which he has not condescended to explain. This morning he told me he had seen you last night, and that the embargo was removed; and Blanche, at the Queen's ball, gave me such a bad account of you that I had made up my mind to see you the first thing this morning if the earl cut me off with a shilling, for I think his conduct to you has been perfectly ridiculous and indefensible."

"My dear fellow, don't think so. There was a misunderstanding, but it has all been explained. No one could have been more sorry about it than your father."

"I will do him the justice to say that he told me so very frankly this morning, and seemed to be very sincere in his repentance. I tell you I never saw my venerable parent so moved. But what in the name of all the mysteries—of Isis, of the Cabiri, of Eleusis, and the mystic numbers of Pythagoras—is the matter? What does it all mean? The earl tells me he has no doubt that your poor father has been the victim of an infamous crime. I never heard of such a thing! What enemies could he have had? No one ever spoke a word of evil of George Barton! Then there's the earl—mysterious as a ghost—pale—worried—upset; a sort of Hamlet or Macbeth. I'm told you were with him till nearly one o'clock this morning. No wonder I find you looking haggard and feverish. It is enough to turn your head."

"Layton, if you only knew all you would wonder my head was not turned. But please don't ask me any questions. I can tell you nothing—nothing whatever. My poor father is dead beyond doubt; he is the victim of a great crime. Your father and I are agreed in fixing our suspicions upon certain persons; at present they are only suspicions; we have not sufficient evidence to justify our mentioning their names even to you."

The face of Lord Charles showed some disappointment.

"Why, George," he said, "look here, you know, I came here to

offer you my services. It is a great mistake, let me tell you, to shut yourself up in this way and nurse your troubles in secret. What is the good of a friend if you don't use him? I tell you, you must let me help you. Open your heart freely to me, my dear fellow; am I not *tuus antiquissimus non solum amicus verum etiam amator?* You can trust me as if I were your own brother."

The moisture which sprung into the young man's eyes as he spoke testified to the sincerity of his words. George Barton, agitated by a sense of the character of that secret which the young lord was urging him, in the sincerity of his friendship to permit him to share, and deeply moved by the brotherly frankness of the appeal, still shook his head. He could not trust himself to speak.

"Why, look here," continued Lord Charles, fumbling about in his pockets, and at length extracting from that of his waistcoat, along with some crumpled bank-notes and gold, a tiny piece of paper, a slip hastily torn off the fly-leaf of some note of invitation, "Blanche is the most sensible girl I ever met—no end of a head. I would sooner take her advice than that of any man I know; and besides, she has a very high opinion of you, let me tell you; says you'll be a very distinguished man; and she spoke about you last night with real anxiety. What the deuce is the matter? Are you in pain?"

"I—I had a kind of spasm here—here in my heart."

"Well, I'll tell you what, George, my boy, this won't do, you know. You'll get knocked up, you know; and—and, if you don't look out you'll be seriously ill. I shall go straight from here to Sir Alfred Marks and tell him to call and see you—yes, yes. By Jove! you know, it's time somebody came and took you in hand. You are simply killing yourself with worry and anxiety, shutting up your griefs in this way, within your own breast. No wonder you have spasms in your heart! Look here, George, I tell you I'm not going to stand by and let this go on."

And the young lord rose and took a few distracted steps about the room, while he flourished the tiny bit of paper in his fingers. He wanted to hide the emotion which was swelling his heart.

"Don't!" cried George Barton, in a voice choked with anguish. "I assure you I am not ill; I am only troubled and excited. I—I will tell you all I ought to tell, Layton, but don't press me, my dear fellow. It is enough to see you, to know that you sympathize with me. I feel better now. What were you going to say about Lady Blanche?"

"Oh! ah!—yes—I forgot—well, look here. I was saying Blanche spoke so anxiously about you last night that, after the earl had given me a hint at breakfast to come and see you, I sent a message up to her room just to say I was coming here. I knew she would like to know it, and she sent me down this little slip. She says—now listen to this—though she is a girl, she talks like a book:

"'So glad you are going; poor fellow, he needs a strong and able friend' (that's her gas, you know). 'Get him to open his heart to you; nothing relieves sorrow or trouble so much as sharing it with a really sympathetic friend. He can and will trust you. My warmest sympathy and good wishes, BLANCHE.'

"There," continued the young lord, crumpling up the slip of paper, and letting it drop upon the floor, from which George Barton could hardly refrain from instantly snatching it up. "That's what Blanche says—written like a female Seneca. I couldn't have expressed it half so well, I tell you. Now is it not common sense? And can you not trust me? And may I not help you? Come, George, I like you too much to leave you to fight out all this terrible business alone; and, if necessary, we'll get her to help us on the sly. I call her the Queen of Sheba, you know, because the Queen of Sheba was, I believe, the only woman who ever managed to stump Solomon. Egad, he wouldn't have had any chance with the women if he had lived in these days of Girton and university exams., though!"

This latter reflection, which seems out of place in so serious a moment, was rather a thought uttered aloud than a remark addressed to the hearer; but Lord Charles was younger than Barton, and his humor, which had some of the cynical flavor of the earl's, was as yet not perfectly under his control. Barton did not notice the incongruity. Lord Charles's good-will was so genuine and cordial, his tone and manner so full of sympathy, that these thoughtless interpolations did not destroy the effect of his more serious words, which besides had a terribly special and esoteric force for poor George. In George Barton's heart just then there had suddenly gushed out a bright, pure fountain of gladness. He kept his eyes on that precious morsel on the floor, over and around which the young lord's varnished shoes were dancing as carelessly as if it were a spoiled cigarette-paper, while George was burning to press it on his heart. He said,

"Sit down, Layton—over here, please. Now let me talk to you frankly. I can not thank you for this visit, and your kind words, and your sister's message, simply because my heart is too full to allow me to express myself. You must not measure the depth of my appreciation of this act of friendship by the extent of my confidences. It is simply infinite. I tell you solemnly, and wish you to tell Lady Blanche, that there are grave and insurmountable reasons why I should not just now take your advice—and hers—and share the troubles and the fearful anxieties which weigh me down with the two most generous and sympathizing hearts that exist within the circle of my acquaintance. The same good feeling which brought you here will lead you to accept this from me. What I may tell you I will, and it will be a relief to me to have your sympathy. Believe me, that I know of nothing—unless it had been the return of my poor dear father alive—nothing that could possibly have given me so much comfort and solace as this visit."

The two young men exchanged a hearty pressure of the hand, and remained silent for a minute. Then George Barton related to his friend so much of the previous circumstances as was known to the police, and as bore simply on the question of the identity of the individual who had died in Regent Circus with George Barton the elder. He did not hesitate to tell Lord Charles that his identity having been established, he should consider it placed beyond doubt that his father had been murdered, and should use every effort to unearth the authors of the crime. But while these brave words

were on his tongue his voice trembled and his heart sunk within him. He had said them deliberately. He wished to keep his resolution firm, to force himself to adhere to the predetermined line of action, to strengthen his resolve by enunciating it to one of those—who would convey it to another—who must be the deepest sufferers by the execution of that resolve. But, as he was speaking, his eye glanced, with an irresistible attraction, to the slip of paper which lay upon the floor. He turned pale, and a shiver went through his frame.

"Stay," said the other, kindly. "These confidences are giving you pain. They open the wounds afresh. It is a terrible business, and full of mystery. I am here when you want me—at any hour—for any duty. Don't hesitate to send for me. Nay, I shall come here every day to look after you, and see that you take care of yourself. You want all your strength for this work. I must talk to the earl, too, and see that he does not shirk any responsibility. Blanche and I will keep him up to the scratch—I'll answer for it!"

And with these words, which were like arrows in Barton's heart, so unconscious were they in their innocent, ignorant good-will, Lord Charles took his leave.

When the door had shut behind his visitor George Barton flew to the spot where the precious scrap of paper was lying, on which Lady Blanche's pencil had hastily traced her kindly lines. There was her bold, strong handwriting—there were the words which would forever rest engraved upon his memory. He pressed them to his lips, and clasped them to his heart, not with the ecstasy of delighted love, but with the terrible joy of a martyr who presses the cross upon a bosom that has been pierced by a sword.

* * * * * * *

George Barton's reflections, which had grown somber and more poignant after those few moments of painful bliss, were disturbed by his laundress bringing him in the morning letters, forgotten up to this moment in the letter-box. One was a sorrowful note from his mother, who announced her intention of coming to town by an early morning train, which would arrive at two o'clock, and begging him to secure rooms for her at the Salisbury Hotel, near the Temple. The other was a line from Mr. Sontag, requesting him to call in Scotland Yard before noon. There was little time to spare. He dressed hastily, and in half an hour entered the private office of the chief of the Detective Department. There were some evidences of excitement in the room, and on the usually quiet face of the principal occupant. A detective in plain clothes, a secretary, and an ordinary sergeant of the blue-bottle species were engaged in animated conversation, all standing. Mr. Sontag held in his hand the end of a speaking-tube which he had just taken from his ear.

"Ah! Mr. Barton," he said, politely. "Glad to see you, sir. You have come in just at the right moment. Look here—do you recognize that?"

He took up a gold watch which was lying on the table and handed it to the young man. When the latter had glanced at it he nearly let it fall from his hand, so extraordinary was the emotion of surprise which the sight of it produced.

"Why," he gasped, "this is my father's watch—the very one he took to Lund's to be repaired!"

Hardly trusting his eyes, he touched the spring. On the inside of the gold hunting-case the words "George Barton," which had once been engraved there, were roughly effaced; but part of the "G" and the latter half of the "n" could be distinguished. He looked at the chief detective in amazement. Were they all wrong, then? Was it not his father after all who had perished in Regent Circus? Mr. Sontag by a sign dismissed the officials who were with him, and when the room was cleared, said,

"You have no doubts, Mr. Barton?"

"None whatever."

"Remember, you had no doubt about this"—Mr. Sontag pointed with his finger to the large bottle, with the white object suspended in spirit, which stood upon a shelf along with other interesting articles.

"This is my father's watch."

"Is that your father's hand?"

George Barton shuddered, put his own hand to his head, and stared at the inquirer in doubt and perplexity. Suddenly a light flashed in his eyes.

"Where was this found? In Regent Circus."

He answered the question for himself, as if the response were a matter of certainty.

"No."

With the natural, or shall we rather say the professional tendency of a detective to mystification, Mr. Sontag was unconscious of the pain that he was inflicting while he postponed the solution of the singular puzzle he had propounded to the young man. George Barton, who was quick, suddenly became conscious of this as he looked at the expression, half-amused, half-provoking, on the face of the distinguished policeman.

"Excuse me, Mr. Sontag," he said, with dignity, "but to me this is not a subject of frivolous curiosity. It concerns the fate of my father."

The detective took the rebuke in good part.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Barton," he said. "The case is so extra—ordinary—that I wished to see how the matter would strike you without explanation. This watch was pawned in the Bow Road on Friday evening last."

"Good heavens!"

"I sent again to Lund's this morning. They inspected this watch. There is no doubt that they handed it to your father, wrapped up in a small box, on Thursday afternoon, at a quarter past four. How did it get into the East End of London on Friday at half-past eight in the evening?"

George Barton shook his head, his ideas were in a thorough state of confusion. He said, however,

"Do you know who the individual was that pawned it?"

"We have his description—'A respectably-dressed man—height judged about five feet six, blue eyes, short, flattish nose, light yellow whiskers, beard and mustache streaked with gray. Wore a

black, soft felt hat. Gave the name of Smith.'" Mr. Sontag read from a paper which lay on his table.

"Clearly not my father."

"I think so. Curiously enough the description, except as to the whiskers, which of course may have been false, corresponds with that of a man we are after with reference to another crime, which is almost as great a mystery as this—the disappearance of a wealthy Jew, who had on his person at the time a packet of diamonds; but I fear it is a mere coincidence. That man, no doubt, we shall have in a few days."

The reader knows how greatly Mr. Sontag's confidence was misplaced.

Young Barton had recovered his self-possession, and his mind at once fixed itself on the problem to be solved. He said:

"The question then is, Is the pawning of this watch in the East End consistent with the theory that the victim of the catastrophe in the Circus was my father?"

"Exactly."

"What are the possible hypotheses?" continued the young man. "1st. My father may have dropped the parcel before he reached the Circus. That is hardly probable. 2d. His pocket may have been picked in going up Regent Street. That is not impossible, though he was always on the alert in going about London. 3d. This watch—like the hand—may have survived the explosion, and being packed in wool, may have been thrown to a great distance, picked up intact, and appropriated. That is just within the bounds of possibility, when we remember that in greater explosions even human beings have been blown a considerable distance and yet have fallen unhurt. I see no other alternative, and they are all unsatisfactory in the extreme."

"There is one other, nevertheless," said Mr. Sontag, proud to show his superior astuteness. "Your theory is that your father was the victim of a conspiracy. You say, though you have not yet been good enough to inform me of the grounds of your suspicion, that certain persons were interesting in putting him out of the way. They must be very rich persons, capable of commanding the assistance of the ablest of those secret criminal organizations which are always existing in the great Continental cities, some of which conceal vulgar criminal objects under the disguise of political associations, others of bogus international financial or commercial companies, wherein we sometimes find men of exceptional intellect and education engaged. Many of these men are really political agitators as well. They have so betogged themselves with socialistical ideas that they have actually succeeded in persuading themselves there is no difference between *meum* and *tuum*. A man when he is persuaded of that is, so far as all human law is concerned, already a criminal in principle. Some go no further; but it is not wonderful if many do not stop there, but become criminals in practice. The Irish agitator, for instance, in the House of Commons, says that the land which belongs to the Irish landlords is that of the Irish tenants. The Irish agitator in Ireland really believes this doctrine, and falls back on it to justify shooting the landlord. I am not a politician, but I simply take note of a fact which, as a policeman,

I am bound to note, and which is to me an alarming one, and it is this: that the socialistic ideas now allowed to be freely propagated in all free countries, and which are being propagated in spite of authority in others, are developing and producing a large number of criminals, not of the ordinary kind—low, vulgar, uneducated villains—but men of intelligence and resources."

"You really believe that?" said Barton.

"Yes," said Mr. Sontag. "Your disappointed Socialist takes it into his head that he can't afford to wait for the millennium. The general distribution of property is too far off. He justifies himself, on principles to which too many respectable competitors for political power give a kind of patronage, in taking for himself that which is next to hand. This very German, Dr. Schultz, whom we are now seeking, is a distinguished chemist, a professed Anarchist, who tried to kill the Emperor of Germany, and who has slipped over from political to private murders. He is mixed up with all the secret societies, and, I doubt not, with the most dangerous clubs of London and Continental criminals. We have never been able to fix him with a crime, though he is suspected of complicity in at least six murders, or attempts to murder. He uses these secret organizations for his private purposes. We have been looking for him for six weeks in every nook and corner of London. We can not lay hands on him. Yet I do not doubt there are scores of men in London who know where he is at this moment."

George Barton was astonished at the intelligence displayed by Mr. Sontag, but he wondered what all this was coming to—what it had to do with the fourth theory. Mr. Sontag probably read a little impatience in the young man's face, for he said,

"But I must not take up your time with my speculations. You will see, however, that they are not without their bearing on what follows. Now, if you are right in your supposition that very rich and powerful people were interested in putting your father out of the way—"

"Stay!" interrupted George Barton, who began to be alarmed at the direction in which Mr. Sontag's insinuations were evidently pointing. "I don't think I ever used the terms you impute to me. I do think that people who control large resources may have had—I use the potential—an interest in silencing my father. I certainly did not use the word powerful; with whatever meaning you may employ it, the word and the idea are not mine. Neither, I believe, have I ever led you to imagine that I had more than a suspicion, or that I had any information which would reasonably justify it."

The unfortunate young man shrunk from encouraging even a suspicion in the mind of this astute inquisitor which might put him on the scent of the perilous facts known to himself. The fatal time would come when he must speak the fatal words—words which would destroy his happiness forever, but he wanted to hold the cards in his own hands a little longer, to put off to the last moment the discharge of his terrible duty.

Mr. Sontag, on his part, felt a good deal of disappointment. He had spoken as he did advisedly, hoping to entrap the young man, who he was persuaded knew more than he had yet disclosed, into a tacit confirmation of his own theories.

"Very well, sir," he said, dryly. "I am content to suppose that the principals in the imaginary plot are wealthy enough to be able to pay handsomely for the work to be done. These people, whoever they are, would easily be able to command the services of such men and such an organization as I have sketched to you. Consequently, every movement of your father would be watched. There may have been half a dozen accomplices on his track that day. Our theory is that they were desirous to attach to or place upon his person a dangerous explosive. They would see him enter Lund's shop. One of them would follow him in. There is a curious fact, which I have ascertained and hitherto concealed from you. A man—answering very closely to the description given by the pawnbroker of the person who pawned this watch—was in the shop at the time when Mr. Barton took it away. This person bought a silver bracelet, which was handed to him wrapped up in a similar parcel to the one which was given to your father. Suppose he followed your father, and made some pretext for exchanging parcels! Suppose that the parcel your father took in exchange was an infernal machine wrapped up in the paper obtained from Lund's! Suppose that he was told they had discovered at Lund's that the wrong parcel had been handed to him, and having no cause to suspect any trick, took it and walked away with it in his pocket! Is not that also a hypothesis not absolutely beyond the limits of probability, and accounting at once for the accident to your father, and the existence of this watch in a safe and sound condition?"

George Barton was startled by the ingenuity of this theory, which, as the reader already knows, was a remarkable guess at the facts as they had occurred; for the lips which would have confirmed it triumphantly to the philosophic detective had been forever silenced, and it was, so far as Mr. Sontag was concerned, an instance of purely constructed hypothesis. Yet it seemed incredible, involving as it did so many suppositions that would scarcely bear the test of consideration. So much is truth really stranger than fiction.

"Now," said Mr. Sontag, "I think you will be disposed to admit that my hypothesis is the only one consistent with the theory that the victim was your father—the only one that will account naturally for the presence on the person of a man of his character and habits of a powerful explosive—the only one that explains the finding of this watch in the Bow Road."

"Stay!" cried George Barton, through whose mind a sudden recollection had flashed; "I am losing the use of my faculties. There is now no doubt that my father was the victim. Have you not been told—has the Earl of Selby not informed you—that young Lord Tilbury has recovered consciousness, and states that he saw my father in front of his horse a moment before the accident?"

"No. How did you learn this?"

"Lord Selby told me so himself late last night. Now I think of it, he has hardly had time to communicate it to you."

"Lord Selby told you this?" said Mr. Sontag, keenly examining the face of the young man, while his own manifested a curious mixture of astonishment, chagrin, and suspicion. "I understood that Lord Selby entertained no doubt that his agent, Mr. Barton, had disappeared with a large amount of valuable property. If

your father's identity with the victim of the crime in the Circus is now placed beyond doubt, what has become of the papers it was alleged that he had abstracted?"

George Barton tried to conceal the dreadful embarrassment into which this question threw him, for Mr. Sontag was, as they say in the children's game of hide-and-seek, getting dangerously hot; but at this moment, fortunately for the young man's candor, a card was brought in for Mr. Sontag, who, glancing at it, said,

"Why, here is the Earl of Selby, probably come to announce this very fact." (To the attendant.) "Ask the earl to be good enough to walk in."

In a moment the peer entered, pale and a little haggard, but self-possessed. He bowed to Mr. Sontag, and gave George Barton a quiet pressure of the hand as he said,

"I see, Barton, you are here before me. Mr. Sontag, I came to give you some very important intelligence which reached me yesterday evening. I suppose my young friend here has told you."

Mr. Sontag had glanced sharply from the earl to young Barton, and from him again to the earl, as they met. He was puzzled beyond measure at the apparent cordiality of the relations between the man who had accused the missing steward of a criminal evasion, and the son of the person thus accused. He said, with a certain emphasis in his tone,

"My lord, Mr. Barton has just given me the intelligence, which of course disposes of the charge your solicitors have made here against your late steward, and, by the way, have also published in the newspapers."

"I am happy to say it does," replied the earl, with quiet frankness "And that, Mr. Sontag, is another object of my coming here to-day. I wish that charge to be withdrawn. It was not made with any strong conviction on my part, and I have expressed my deep sorrow that it ever should have been made to Mr. Barton's son, who is my godson. It was a charge brought with regrettable thoughtlessness and want of judgment."

George Barton stood paralyzed between his appreciation of this handsome and manly retractation, and his terror at the perilous disclosure which the earl had made to the astute Chief of the Detective Department. It had been arranged the night before that they were to act in concert, but the earl had resolved that at any risk he would discharge his conscience to this extent.

"And what, then," inquired Mr. Sontag, with some vivacity, "is your lordship's theory of the cause of this extraordinary—accident to Mr. Barton?"

"That, again," replied the earl, quickly, "is precisely the question, Mr. Sontag, which I have come here to ask your department to assist me to solve. I intended to have seen the chief commissioner. He is absent, and I was referred to you. I wish you to offer in my name a reward of £2,000 for the discovery of the murderers of George Barton."

The detective-in-chief started, and screwed up his eyes in order to get a better look at the earl. George Barton was visibly uneasy. The strings were getting out of his hand.

"My lord—may I venture to ask your lordship," said Mr. Son-

tag, putting on an appearance of delicate hesitation which he did not feel, for his question was meant to go to the bottom of things, "whether—you have—a—consulted your solicitors before you took this important step?"

The earl drew himself up.

"I don't quite see the relevancy of that question at the moment. I have consulted my heart, Mr. Sontag. Mr. Barton, senior, was my intimate friend and counselor for twenty-five years. I am determined at any cost to solve the mystery of his fate, the more decidedly that I was a party to doing a temporary injustice to his mmory."

Mr. Sontag bowed.

"Of course your lordship's wishes shall be carried out, but"—he glanced at the earl and George Barton—"we ought to be frankly informed of everything you, and Mr. Barton's son, and your solicitors know which would give a clew to the persons who may have had a motive for committing such a crime."

"That matter," replied the earl, "is earnestly engaging the attention of Mr. Barton here and myself. I admit it puzzles us. It would be premature at this moment, and even unjust, to say any more."

Had the earl been a common person, Mr. Sontag would have told him here that, if he consulted the Detective Department of the police to assist in unraveling a crime, or whether he consulted it or not, if he withheld, even for an hour, information which would tend to throw light upon the perpetrators, he was incurring a serious risk; for the criminals might escape while he was deciding whether his suspicions were justifiable. But he was a peer of the realm and a magistrate, and the chief thought that he had better hold his tongue.

The astute chief was already beginning to get a very dangerous insight into the state of affairs. Here was the earl acting with young Barton. Was that sincere? He was acting also, he felt sure, though the earl had not admitted it, either without consulting, or in direct disagreement with, Pollard & Pollard. What did that mean? Or was that, too, a ruse?

There was something more running through the detective's mind, which neither of his visitors was aware of. The sergeant who had been in the room when young Barton entered was Sergeant Gosforth, of the East-end division, sent up by the sub-chief of that district to make a startling report. McLaren—whom Sontag had told off to account for Mr. Charles Pollard's movements on the previous night in substitution for Garbett, whom we have seen under the *alias* of Dillon, had claimed the assistance of X 332 the night before to obtain a disguise, with the intention of following a supposed mariner down Dutchman's Alley and into the public-house known as the Dutch Lugger. X 332 having waited till midnight, and having neither heard nor seen anything of McLaren, had concluded that the latter had slipped off after his man in some other direction. McLaren had not turned up. Search being ordered, a body of police overhauled the Dutch Lugger and neighborhood without finding a trace of McLaren, though the frowzy bar-maid remembered distinctly the strange sailor, answering to the description given, who was very drunk, and who went away by the private door without paying for his drink.

Did any other persons go out with him or before him?

She did not know. She did not know whether any other persons had been with or near the detective. She minded her own business, she did. There was no one now attainable who could describe the disguise assumed by Mr. Charles Pollard; for that it was Mr. Charles Pollard whom the detective was following Mr. Sontag had not a shadow of doubt—he knew his man—though the unfortunate fellow, with the professional secrecy of a detective, had not disclosed to X 332 the name of the person he was watching. Yet Mr. Sontag had received a report that Mr. Charles Pollard had entered his office at the usual hour of half-past nine, bright and fresh as ever. Nay, by a little stratagem, Garbett had already discovered that Mr. Charles Pollard had not dined at home the night before, and how he was dressed when he returned. He was making his report when Barton entered Mr. Sontag's room, and this was how he had done it.

He rang the bell of No. 280 Queen's Gate, and tendered an umbrella to the servant.

"I think this umbrella belongs to a gentleman who got out of a hansom here last evening. I took the hansom myself afterward, and only noticed it as I was getting out."

"It don't look like Mr. Pollard's, sir. What time, please?"

"Half-past eight," said Mr. Garbett, at a venture. "It was daylight. I'm pretty sure he came in here. It may be a friend's umbrella."

"You're mistaken, sir. No gentleman called here last night. Mrs. Pollard was at the opera, and Mr. Pollard was dining at his club."

"Oh, it may have been later. He was dressed in a black frock-coat. I'm quite sure of the house."

"Why, sir," replied the servant, annoyed by the other's persistence, "Mr. Pollard didn't come in till past twelve o'clock, and he was dressed in evening dress, with a light overcoat on his arm."

After making a feint of calling at other houses, Mr. Garbett returned to Scotland Yard, where there were lists of the members of every club in London. Mr. Charles Pollard was a member of the "Thatched House Club." It would soon be known whether he had dined there.

The sergeant had reported another suspicious fact. In the next alley, leading to the river, to that of the public-house a small pool of blood was discovered, and drops of blood were traced to the water-side, where they ended. If McLaren had gone out by the back way from the Dutch Lugger, as he must have done, since he had not rejoined policeman X 332, these traces of blood, connected with the fact of his disappearance, excited the most lively apprehensions as to his fate. Drags had been set to work in the river. A strong force of detectives and police were scouring the whole neighborhood of Wapping.

Where was McLaren? what was Mr. Charles Pollard doing in Wapping at that hour? how had he got there? and so on. All this was disturbing Mr. Sontag's mind while he was conversing with his visitors. Mystery was being involved in mystery, and horror piled upon horror. The criminals he had to deal with would stand at nothing. They evidently had unlimited ability and resources.

He did not, however, give his visitors any hint of the new tragedy which had sent a thrill of consternation through Scotland Yard, and he had directed that the matter should be kept out of the journals.

The appearance of the Earl of Selby on the scene in a new character, that of a friend of old Mr. Barton acting with the son of the late agent, and professing a lively anxiety to sift the mystery to the bottom, imported a troublesome confusion into Mr. Sontag's theories. The solution which he had imagined involved the complicity of no less a person than a peer of the realm. Now this very peer was acting like an innocent man, and independently of, if not in hostility to, his supposed accomplices. The Chief of the Detective Department saw that he must reconstruct his hypotheses while carefully keeping on his guard against a collusive attempt to deceive him and George Barton, whose sincerity was not to be questioned. This sudden understanding between the earl and the young man was in itself very suspicious. It had taken place, too, immediately after the earl had become cognizant of the fact that Lord Tilbury could verify the identity of the individual who perished in the Circus; and the peer had not communicated this fact directly to the police, but to George Barton.

All these reflections, however, Mr. Sontag kept to himself. Only, as the earl took leave, he said, in an off-hand manner,

"Your lordship will probably see Messrs. Pollard & Pollard, and instruct them to withdraw the advertisment with regard to Mr. Barton?"

The peer was just about to answer this insidious question, when his quick glance detected a certain cunning anxiety in Mr. Sontag's eye, which led him to alter the character of his reply.

"They quite understand that, Mr. Sontag; good-morning."

Outside the door the earl slipped his hand through young Barton's arm and led him to his *coupé*, which was standing in Parliament Street.

"To Grosvenor Place," he said to the footman.

When the door was closed upon his visitors, Mr. Sontag, with a curious smile upon his face, turned to his desk, and picking up a letter ran his eye over it. It was in these terms·

"(*Confidential.*)

"POLLARD & POLLARD,
"155 Lincoln's Inn Fields, W. C.
July 1, 188—.

"*To the Chief Commissioner of Police, Scotland Yard, S. W.:*

"SIR,—Referring to our communication to you of yesterday's date, and to our advertisement of same date, concerning the disappearance of Mr. George Barton, solicitor, of Manor Calham, Selby, Yorks, we now have the honor to inform you that we have only this day discovered that, to our deep regret, a serious error has been made in regard to the supposed loss of the deeds of title, bonds, etc., stated in that advertisement to be missing. Through an extraordinary oversight, these papers, although forming a parcel of considerable bulk, had been overlooked among a vast quantity of law papers lying in the private room of our senior partner, and were

only detected this morning, in the course of a search for the documents in another case.

"This, of course, disposes of the charge which we had, by direction of the Earl of Selby, brought against Mr. Barton, and renders it unnecessary, so far as the earl or we are concerned, to pursue any further inquiries as to the whereabouts of Mr. Barton, who, we trust, has simply withdrawn himself under the influence of some temporary aberration of intellect.

"We have the honor to be, sir, yours faithfully,

"POLLARD & POLLARD."

"Hum!" said Mr. Sontag, musing, when he had finished the perusal of this epistle. "What is the meaning of this? The earl evidently did not know anything about this letter, and they evidently don't know what he was doing here just now. The two parties are playing at cross-purposes. I begin to think the earl is genuine; if so, Messrs. Pollard & Pollard, you are the gentlemen who demand my particular attention! This is very fishy, to say the least of it, and men of business who mislay important documents and accuse a brother professional of felony one day, and find the papers and withdraw the charge on the next, must not be surprised if they themselves become objects of suspicion. The secret of Barton's murder is, I suspect, wrapped up in those papers, and I am resolved to know what they are."

He touched an electric bell, and a sharp, intelligent-looking member of the force appeared.

"Send Mr. Garbett here."

Garbett, *alias* Dillon, had a totally different manner when in the presence of his chief from that which characterized his moments of social expansion. He was stiff, precise, brief, and business-like. He had two exterior signs of the faculties which his profession is supposed to develop most—the faculties, namely, of seeing and hearing. His eyes were large and disagreeably prominent, his ears were simply phenomenal. His jaw—or rather muzzle, for it assumed that character—was exceedingly protuberant, and his lips were large and sensual. They moved over the jaw with marvelous flexibility, seeming to indicate a large potentiality of that sort of eloquence which is common among a certain class of Dissenting preachers in Scotland and Ireland, where such jaws abound, and where the large lips of so many weak enthusiasts are working to prove that they have been touched with a live-coal from off the altar. So little is the fine, subtle meaning of that vision of Isaiah understood, as indicating that it is only to one or two select spirits of each age that the special inspiration of genius is vouchsafed; that only to one or two in every age is given the right or the power to prophesy to their fellow-men. Mr. Garbett, however, happily had not misdirected his jaws to the purpose of feeble and bigoted conceit. He devoted them chiefly to a much more practical purpose, namely, the trituration of agreeable comestibles. Indeed, he quite discountenanced the principles of Lavater, for there was not a closer or safer man in the service. His face, like an actor's, was cleanly shaven, to facilitate the adoption of disguises—a fashion which exposed a vast area of blue-black surface, deeply rutted here and there

with expressive valleys and riverine lines of wrinkle. He had a habit of holding the head in a stiff, listening position, which seemed to indicate that he heard better with the right ear than the left, although in truth they were both equally sharp; and it was only a habit which had grown out of excessive self-consciousness, and sense of the importance of the rôle which, according to the catechism, Providence had assigned him in the comedy of life. This habit, by the way, he shared in common with many distinguished men of letters and persons of "culture." In this position, with his hands crossed over the rim of his hat, which he held modestly in front of a promising paunch, he stood waiting for his chief to speak.

"Garbett," said Mr. Sontag, "I am afraid McLaren has been nipped."

"Looks like it, sir."

Nothing had stirred except Mr. Garbett's lips, but that is to say about one third of his face. The large balls of his prominent eyes remained immovable, for, like a fly, Mr. Garbett could see before him or sideways, and almost all round him without changing the inclination of the axis.

"There could be no doubt whatever that he was on the track of Mr. Charles Pollard."

"Positive, sir."

"What could Mr. Pollard have been doing in Wapping, and evidently in disguise, at that hour of the night?"

"No good, sir."

"And the man who was watching him is—made away with—while he gets home safe! Those two gentlemen must be watched more closely than ever. There is something behind all this."

This remark, seeming to be only the outward expression of some internal reflection of his chief's, the detective noted in silence.

"If, as I now strongly suspect, Messrs. Pollard have something to do with the murder of Mr. Barton, they must be in communication with some gang which has its head quarters in Wapping."

Mr. Garbett's head moved a little from one side to the other.

"I hardly think so, sir," he said. "It's more likely that place was chosen for a rendezvous because it was furthest away from their usual haunts."

Mr. Sontag looked up quickly.

"That is a bright thought, Garbett," he said, nodding his head approvingly. "You think, then, that the character of the crime rather indicates a superior West-end intelligence—eh?" He smiled grimly.

"I think so, sir."

"Outside the Invincibles, where is there a man who is capable of conceiving and carrying out such a daring and clever design?"

Mr. Garbett squeezed his large lips and tipped his head a little more on one side.

"There's Schultz, sir."

"The very man I was thinking of. Clever, unscrupulous, a perfect dare-devil, if all our reports of him are correct, and mixed up with all these foreign Socialists and criminals. Besides, I have a strong suspicion he is the man who pawned the watch; but then,

surely he is too clever a fellow to have risked detection by doing that?"

"I don't know, sir. Some of these fellows seem to act as if they rather liked to show off their daring. Very likely he has bolted, and wanted to get rid of the watch as a dangerous thing to have about him."

"Why didn't he throw it into the river, then?"

Garbett slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"You can never tell. You see, sir, by the pawn-ticket, he got twelve pun' ten on the watch; it's valuable. Very likely he got five hundred guineas for the job—if he did it—but he couldn't bear not to realize this little asset. It's human nature, I suppose. Besides, he may have thought it a clever way of throwing us off the scent. As he pawned it in the East-end, I should look for him in the West or South-west."

"There's no sign whatever of Schultz?"

"None, sir, since he left his house in Fulham."

"Have you ransacked all his haunts?"

"All, sir. All the meetings of the societies he used to attend have been watched, and everybody we could think of who was ever seen with him; but he keeps as close as a weasel. My private opinion is he's left the country."

"The difficulty is to guess how Charles Pollard could have got into communication with him. Who is the link? Where is the link?"

"That's what stumps me, sir. I can't think of any one. But I shall. There are a good many respectable gentlemen who have their little secrets, you know."

"This Dutch Lugger, the report says it has a bad reputation. Is there no particular gang connected with it?"

"No. It's a cut-throat place, but that is due to its being a resort of low foreign seamen. Knives are very often out there, and sometimes used. The inspector of that district thinks they supply a good many 'found drowned' cases to the river, and the police never venture down there alone; but it is not what we should call a criminal house of call. That, I expect, is the very reason it was chosen for a meeting between Pollard and the people he went to see."

"Probably," said Mr. Sontag; "and it is impossible to suppose that Mr. Pollard's business there was a legitimate one. Well, what was it? A very curious thing has happened to-day. Pollards, professing to act for the Earl of Selby, but without his knowledge, I am certain, have withdrawn the charge and the advertisement against Mr. Barton. The papers are found."

"Indeed, sir!"

"Yes. They pretend they were mislaid. I think you said you had succeeded in getting hold of a useful source of information inside their office."

A brief, gay light filled the dismal crystal of the detective's orbs as he replied,

"One of their old, confidential clerks, name of Grayson."

"Good; you must pump him. I want to know at what hour Mr. Charles Pollard left the office last night—Joseph Pollard is ac-

counted for; he went home to Regent's Park, and stayed there—and whether Charles Pollard was at his club, as stated by his servant? He could not have been there long, as we are certain he must have been in Wapping. Have you found out what club he belonged to?"

"The Thatched House, sir."

"Very well. We must ascertain when and how long he was there, and in what company. The porters of these clubs are very close; they keep the secrets of their members well. You will have to exercise a little ingenuity."

"Easily done, sir."

"How?"

Mr. Sontag was fond of testing the intelligence of his agents.

"The boy who takes the letters to the post. You can see them all scuttling down Pall Mall for Charing Cross every evening at about quarter to six. He can always see the porter's register with the name and hours of entry and departure, and he's the only servant besides the *commissionnaire* who gets out. A sovereign will go a long way with him."

"Well, that is your affair. No one knows better than you, Garbett, how to manage these things."

A very slight thrill of satisfied pride shook the frame of Mr. Garbett, which, like many of the earth-shocks now so frequently reported in the newspapers, "was not attended by any disastrous consequences" to his statuesque rigidity.

"Then, Garbett, there is another matter I should mention. The Earl of Selby has just been here with young Barton. He has authorized me to offer a reward of £2000"—a second slight convulsion in Mr. Garbett's frame, and a glimmer in the huge eye-balls—"for the discovery of the murderers of Mr. Barton in Regent Circus. There is no longer room for doubt that he was the victim, for the Earl of Tilbury has recovered consciousness, and stated that he recognized him at the moment of the accident. I believe the Earl of Selby to be sincere, and he is acting in disagreement with his solicitors. The key to the mystery of Mr. Barton's fate lies somewhere in those papers. They have been found, but at any cost I must know what they are."

Mr. Sontag took up the memorandum-book marked "G. B.," and referred to the advertisement, which he had gummed upon one of the leaves.

"In this advertisement Pollard & Pollard agreed to supply a list of those papers to whom it might concern. It concerns us, the detective police. We ought to have asked for that list immediately; we will ask for it now, and I will have it, or know the reason why."

He touched an electric bell. His clerk, a short-hand writer, appeared, with a pen behind his ear, a vial of ink suspended at his button-hole, and a reporter's note-book in his hand.

"Messrs. Pollard & Pollard, Solicitors, 155 Lincoln's Inn Fields. Gentlemen," said Mr. Sontag, and the clerk's hand flew over the paper, "I am directed by the Chief Commissoner of Police to acknowledge receipt of your letter of this date, relating to the disappearance of Mr. George Barton, solicitor, of Manor Calham, Set-

by, Yorks, and stating that the 'bonds, deeds of title, etc.,' alleged in your advertisement to have been missing, and which you supposed to have been abstracted by Mr. Barton, have been found, and that this 'renders it unnecessary, so far as the Earl (of Selby) and yourselves are concerned, to pursue any further inquiries as to the whereabouts of Mr. Barton.'

"I am instructed by the chief commissioner to say that this is so far satisfactory that it limits the range of inquiry to the single point of the cause of the mysterious disappearance of that gentleman: but it would appear that you have been imperfectly instructed as to the wishes and intentions of your noble client in regard to the further inquiries to be made into the causes of Mr. Barton's disappearance, since the earl has himself left instructions at this office to offer a reward of two thousand pounds for the discovery of the person or persons who murdered Mr. Barton, or caused his death, by dynamite or some other powerful explosive, in Regent Circus, on Thursday afternoon last. Possibly the earl's intimation to you of his intentions in this particular may have been delayed in transmission. I am instructed to add that the information now in the possession of this department conclusively establishes the identity of Mr. Barton with the victim of the Regent Circus catastrophe.

"In these circumstances, the chief commissioner deems it necessary that this department should be immediately informed of what was the nature of those important documents referred to in your advertisement, and supposed to have disappeared with Mr. Barton, as they may tend to throw some light upon the nature of his relations with some person or persons who may have been interested in making away with him. And I am instructed to beg that you will, in furtherance of justice, furnish the chief commissioner, per bearer, Mr. George Garbett, of this department, with a list and description of those documents, and will also kindly inform him whether there is any objection to permitting the same to be inspected —of course in strict confidence—by an agent of this department— etc., etc."

"There," said Mr. Sontag, "this will at least throw some perturbation into the enemies' camp if they are not innocent. It rather exceeds what we have a right to demand, and it gives them some important information, which will perhaps surprise them; but from this moment, Garbett, those two gentlemen must be placed under strict and continuous surveillance. If they are not very sure of their ground, they will, after this letter, try to escape, and if they do we will run the risk of detaining them. Don't come back without that list, and take care that all the outlets from their offices are closely watched. Put four men on the duty."

"All right, sir."

Mr. Garbett's frame seemed to be galvanized into action by some battery of nervous force hidden in his stomach, and with a stiff salute, he left the room.

Mr. Sontag turned to the clerk and dictated an advertisement, headed, "Murder—Two Thousand Pounds Reward!" setting forth the circumstances of the catastrophe in Regent Circus, and affirming that the victim was George Barton, agent of the Earl of Selby,

and offering in the earl's name the above reward, etc. This was written out to be submitted to the chief commissioner, and the chief of the Detective Department turned to other mysteries with which his desk and brains were crowded. No minister of state, with his four or five thousand *per annum*, no judge upon the bench with an equal salary, was ever called upon to exert such forces of intellect, such clearness of head, such anxious and incessant diligence, such physical capacity for work, as this administrative officer supplied for a few hundreds a year.

CHAPTER XIV.

LORDS OR COMMONS?

THE sleep of Lady Blanche Layton after her remarkable vigil had been beatific but short. We have seen that, at a tolerably early hour, she had indited a note, carelessly written, but which now occupied a position in the side pocket of Mr. George Barton's coat, opposite that emblem of the soft passion which nature has planted in every human breast. The weakness of the strongest men is really deplorable. She had also received and read a delicate little penciled note from the Countess of Tilbury. It was thus conceived:

"Monday Night.

"DEAREST BLANCHE,—He has asked for you. We have so much hope since we find that the brain is so clear and the memory so perfect. His strength, too, is increasing. He said this evening, 'Wouldn't it be nice if Blanche were my wife, and were here to help you?' I let him talk a little. Ah, what a goose I was to-day not to take you at your word! However, my dear, I must see you. Come over as soon as you can in the morning.

"Your loving

"AUNT."

The effect of this missive upon Lady Blanche, who was lazily perusing her correspondence in bed, was somewhat phenomenal. After a first rapid glance over the note, she jumped out of bed with all the energy and *insouciance* of a school-girl, scattering crested notes and cards and envelopes all over the carpet. Then, quite unmindful of two little feet which remained uncovered in the immediate neighborhood of a pair of crimson satin slippers, embroidered in gold, she leaned against the side of her bed and read over the letter, word by word, while an odd mixture of mischief and seriousness played in her violet eyes.

It should be remembered that the last thought she had had before she went to sleep had been George Barton, and the first thing to which she had awakened in the morning was George Barton; and this early thought was kindly and expansive. I can not say that she had done much more than hastily think and write that little note, which then no gold could have repurchased; but that slight ebullition of sentiment and sympathy had left behind it a beneficent feeling of satisfacton, the cause or the extent of which Lady Blanche

Layton would never probably have taken the pains, nor had the occasion, to analyze, had not the countess's note, and her report of the serious thoughts by which the young earl had signalized the revival of sensibility, forced the young lady to contrast the feelings with which she had read the one note and indited the other. Indeed, a vague cloud of trouble began to be visible in those beautiful eyes as she stood there, with her neck bent, and her look fixed on the fatal, loving, but diplomatic little scrawl.

"Oh, dear!" she said, "how bothersome! What on earth am I to do?"

Her thought was in reality much more profoundly serious than would be imagined, from the light frivolity of these words—the first effervescence to the lips of the trouble which preoccupied her heart. All the long reverie of the previous night returned to her now rapidly and clearly; the sense of relief that she had not been "taken at her word," the solemn attestation of her heart that she did not love her cousin as a woman should love the man to whom she gives up body and soul, the reflections upon her mother's sage and noble words. As yet there was no serious *arrière pensée* in this. No other shadow or substance had consciously taken up any strong position in the fair citadel that so many brave souls were sighing to carry and subdue. But there was a knightly and a melancholy figure which stood before the gate, making no summons, attracting sympathy, and awakening the interest of the lady of the castle, simply by the nobleness of his attitude. And here in this note was a second appeal to the same sort of feeling. Her cousin was not out of danger; he had naïvely exposed the state of his heart. The appeal in his case, too, was largely *ad misericordiam*. He did love her; and her aunt's note, however carefully worded to avoid the least suggestion of pressure, was colored between the lines with the motherly anxiety and affectionate longing which she was too true, as well as too clever, a woman to express in clear terms.

If George Barton's dilemma was a serious one, that of Lady Blanche was not without its tragical aspects. She seemed to feel at the moment a longing, for reasons she could not, or at least she would not, define to herself, to have her heart absolutely free. But if she declined to permit any definite reason for this to take form in her thoughts, she had, in reasoning over her mother's words, begun to appreciate, with much more clearness than she had ever done before, the weight, the critical importance of that saying, "Your heart is your own, which you alone have the right to dispose of." Alas, how many women there are for whom that apothegm would simply mean the intrusting of their fate to the weakest and most imbecile of guardianships! But in Lady Blanche's case it was put in strong hands, and her serious midnight reflections had revealed to her that she was able and willing to assume the responsibility, and, what was more, she had determined to do it.

The battle, then, was to be begun at once; for this little note of Lady Tilbury's was a gentle, chivalric summons to the lists: and poor Blanche felt her knees tremble, and her heart almost stand still at the prospect of the tourney. She must fight for her own heart.

It was later than she expected when the landau, for the earl had

borrowed her *coupé* that morning, drove up to the Tilbury mansion; in fact it was just about lunch time. A carriage turned out to make way for hers, and she recognized her own horses and the family livery.

"Why, papa must be lunching here, too," she said; and for some inexplicable reason her heart began to beat quickly with a premonition of some surprise.

"Is the earl here, Simpson?"

"He is, Lady Blanche, and young Mr. Barton. Lunch is just going to be served in the dining-room. The countess is down for the first time."

Accordingly, in the morning-room, Lady Blanche found her aunt and the two gentlemen. The quiet little emphasis of her ladyship's embrace did not pass unnoticed by the quick young lady, whose susceptibilities, moreover, were in a somewhat morbid state of intensity, and she remarked, with grief and regret, that this *empressement* suddenly aroused within herself some grotesque monkey of anger or revulsion, not against her aunt, but against the idea she seemed to personify. This sent an almost imperceptible chill through the effusiveness of her reception and return of the countess's embrace, a slight languor of cordiality, which the fine sense of the elder woman perceived, but attributed to a wrong cause.

"You seem a little pale and weary, my dear. I fear you do not get enough sleep."

"It is rather hard work to be a fashionable lady," replied Lady Blanche, with a slight tone of bitterness, which she endeavored to neutralize by a little laugh, "and, unhappily, the labor is so useless."

The earl laughed.

"My dear Blanche," he said, "even butterflies have their place in the economy of nature."

"And fleas—and gnats," she replied, quickly, with a saucy glance at her father. "How are you, Mr. Bartton?"

The transfiguration of Barton's somber face, when at length the young lady turned to him and familiarly held out her hand, could not escape the keen eyes of the countess, though the earl did not see it. An arrow went through Lady Tilbury's heart, and she said to herself, "What does this mean?" A man in Barton's position needs to practice all the subtlety and feint which Machiavelli revindicates for government and diplomacy, if he would not prematurely betray himself to the intuitive perspicacity of feminine spectators.

Blanche was conscious of the mistake he was making in allowing his cheek to flush and his eye to brighten and rest upon her face, with just a little too much emphasis of adoration, and she was angry at it. She withdrew her hand quickly, and turning to her aunt, plunged rapidly into a series of animated questions about her cousin's condition. The doctors now pronounced him in a fair way of recovery, unless some sudden excitement should occasion a relapse.

Barton, in the presence of the Sun, was standing in the shadows. Lady Blanche took care not to give him either the occasion or the encouragement to look at her again as he had done. I think she was a little annoyed to be thus obliged to stand upon her guard, and

that possibly some such thought as this was formulated in the inmost sanctum of her mind—"What fools men are!" And it is true that in matters of love men are the weakest and most inartistic of actors. Altogether Blanche was somewhat worried and disappointed with this lunch. She had the apprehension of what was to come after it, and no satisfaction whatever from Barton's presence. She knew what had taken place at the Temple, for the faithful Lord Charles had returned and told her everything—except, of course, that one bit of imbecility about the note, which he never could have suspected—and she could not refer to that interview in the present company. There had already been established, therefore, a sort of subterranean sympathy and communication between these two young people.

Altogether, this lunch was not a gay or happy one. The countess was too anxious about her son's health and future happiness to be expansive; the earl was preoccupied with subjects which the presence of others forced him to avoid; and Barton, after the slight repulse administered to him by the fair lady, relapsed into monosyllabic gloom. Blanche, who felt the need of saying something to keep herself in countenance, talked on incessantly to a very unappreciative audience.

"Blanche," said the earl, slyly, at the end of the lunch, "you have been most heroic. I never heard you say so much in the same time, and to three such indifferent auditors. We owe you an apology. But you have nothing to think of—while we are all heavily charged with our separate and special anxieties."

He heaved a sigh and uttered these last words with a melancholy cadence.

Blanche reddened a little at this speech which, like so many of those hasty little cynicisms of clever men, cut deeply, and replied, as she glanced at her aunt, and just for an instant at Barton, who stood with his eyes on the floor,

"If I have nothing to think of—though I think I have enough to occupy a weak intellect like mine, my lord—it is because you do not choose to let me share your anxieties with you. I should like to try at least to prove that I was something more than the butterfly. I might spin a cocoon—"

"And become a grub," said the earl, who couldn't resist the retort. "My dear Blanche," he said, putting his arm on her shoulder fondly, "there is time enough for you to know the worries of life. There is your aunt there, who will tell you how soon and how fast such weeds grow in the fairest gardens."

"I am not talking of weeds, my dear father," said Lady Blanche, gravely, "nor of flower-beds. I was thinking more of the commonplace utilities which would be more correctly figured by a market-garden."

"Cabbages!" cried the earl. "Onions, carrots, asparagus, Brussels—"

A little hand was put over his mouth.

"You sha'n't make fun of me, my lord. You know you don't mean it, you provoking creature you; but you—you treat me like a fool, and—and I don't like it," said Lady Blanche, on whose fair,

blooming cheek two little crystal signs of vexation suddenly sprung to the light. She bit her lip, and turned away rapidly to hide them.

"God forbid, my dear child!" said the earl, taking both her hands in his and pressing them affectionately. "No one knows better than I do that there is a serious and clever brain inclosed in that charming bonnet. Your useful time is coming. I would only save you as long as I can from the vulgar troubles and trials of life."

The countess, who wished that this little scene had had no fourth spectator, brusquely put her arm through that of her niece and drew her toward the door.

"Your cabbage-garden will be ready for your little spade soon enough, my dear," she said. "Good morning, Mr. Barton. God help you in your troubles! I should like to see your mother as soon as I can get out and she feels able to receive me."

"And please, Mr. Barton, give her my best love and sympathy," added Lady Blanche, "and say I will try to find that place in the City—the Salisbury—I shall remember the name of the Conservative leader—and take her home with me for a few hours. She must be heart-broken."

The contrast between the patronizing manner of the countess and the frank, equal cordiality of Lady Blanche's words struck Barton keenly.

The ladies bowed as he opened the door for their exit, and the earl, excusing himself for a moment, followed them. The young man sighed, strolled to the window and looked gloomily out. Never had his love been more frantically intense, or looked more intensely hopeless. With the delicate supersensitiveness of the lover who is not sure of his ground, he divined that the countess had guessed his secret, and was annoyed. Never before had her tone and manner to him been more accentuated with hauteur.

"Is it a plenary amnesty?" said the peer, when they were in the hall, putting on an air of half-comic, half-earnest anxiety. In this period of critical trouble his heart turned with an eager longing toward the affection of this daughter, the living image and reflection of his dead wife. His feelings had been touched by those two little tell-tales on her cheeks, and he could not bear to carry away, among his other anxieties, the thought that he had left, however minute, a thorn in her young heart.

"Nonsense, my dear earl," said the countess, whom this incident, for some subtle reason, had violently displeased. "I thought Blanche had ceased to be a child, and that you had long since attained to years of discretion. One can see that you are beginning to pass beyond them. Such a little scene before that boy George Barton, was quite out of place, and ridiculous! Come away, Blanche," she added, trying, with ill-success, to alter her tone into one of good-humored banter: "I am going to be very angry with you, and give you a blowing-up."

"Poor Blanche!" said the earl; "I am afraid you are going to be committed for trial; but, perhaps this time the 'beak' will let you off with a caution."

The countess was quite out in her tactics—an error which must be attributed to eagerness and anxiety on behalf of the patient upstairs. Her niece had views of her own as to what was discreet and

what was permissible in society, and a certain sentiment of rebellion against the tyrannies of conventionality. She did not feel at all ashamed of having exhibited a little generous, womanly feeling before George Barton, and moreover the countess's reference to him as "that boy" had curiously annoyed her. Why? Well, gentle or ungentle, reader, why a woman thinks anything is never an easy question to answer; but it can not be overlooked by the most careless lounger over these pages that the Lady Blanche had in a sense taken young Barton under her patronage, and had vouchsafed him her royal sympathy and good-will, and it was derogatory to the dignity of her sentiments to have the object, or the subject, of those regal sentiments contemptuously designated as "that boy."

At any other time the acute, sensible woman of the world would probably have recollected that scorn is the last weapon to level against the object of a woman's interest when she is young and generous, and especially when, as in this case, that object is one against whom it is leveled unjustly. For no one knew better, or more highly appreciated than the countess, the sterling, manly qualities of the person of whom she had permitted herself to speak in a tone of half-comic disparagement. Blanche, surprised at this little outbreak, was naturally put upon her ingenuity to guess the cause of it, and to attribute it to its real motive, her ladyship's motherly preoccupation about her son. That even angels may have bad tempers, we know from the history of the devil and our own domestic experiences, and Lady Blanche had, with all her sweetness, a little hidden bag of gall in her temperament. And just then her frame was in a somewhat hyperæsthetic condition—one by no means favorable to the kind of treatment which the poor, anxious mother, wearied and excited by her son's illness, and piqued to the core by that tell-tale radiance on the face of the impolitic Barton, was disposed to adopt. The young lady, indeed, resolved, instead of waiting for the attack, to be beforehand with it; and no sooner had she and her aunt reached the boudoir (devoted to the latter when she was on a visit to her son's house), than she said,

"I am afraid, dear aunt, you will find me a very contumacious criminal, for I don't for the life of me see what impropriety the earl and I have committed which merits your displeasure."

Her ladyship looked with some surprise at Lady Blanche, whose firm tone and heightened color gave a perfectly clear indication that her aunt's proposed correction was not going to be meekly received. The countess knew her niece's character, and sometimes had been heard to express her regret, though generally with good-humored toleration, that the comparative independence the young lady had enjoyed since her mother's death had tended to make her too dogmatic and self-willed.

"Well, my dear," said the countess, who was inwardly nettled by the rather peremptory fashion in which her niece had summoned her to explanations, but who really wished to avoid any unpleasantness, "you see there are certain things that ought only to be said and done among ourselves, in the intimacy of the family. Don't you think that it was rather indiscreet to have such a little scene—a perfect little scene, my dear Blanche—tears on your cheeks—some

pettishness in your voice—especially, you know, before that young person—"

"What, my dear aunt, George Barton?" cried the young lady in a tone of raillery.

"Gracious goodness, my dear, what are you coming to? You mention this young person's name with a familiarity which astonishes me—"

"Why, my dear aunt, what do you mean? George Barton is one of Charlie's best friends, and almost one of the family."

"Oh!" cried the countess, deeply offended by Lady Blanche's tone, and more by her manner, both being frivolous and provoking. (These *nuances* of feminine expression are indescribable, unless one employed different colored inks and various fonts of type, to which our publisher unreasonably objects.) "Oh! 'almost one of the family!' That, my dear, is one of the most extraordinary of all the extraordinary things I ever heard you say. This young person—a most worthy and excellent young man, for whom, in his place, I have a great deal of esteem—you speak of in such terms as that! Truly, I think it is time that some one should offer you a little kindly advice, for you are strangely wanting in discretion. No wonder the young gentleman permitted himself, even in the solemn circumstances in which he is placed, to look at you to-day with a broadness of familiarity which I can assure you, my dear, to me was perfectly startling, if that is the light in which you allow him to suppose you view him. 'Almost like one of the family,' indeed! Is that, think you, the footing upon which the earl receives him?"

Lady Blanche bit her lip. She was vexed that her aunt had surprised young Barton's look, which she hoped had escaped unnoticed by any one but herself. However, in rather impolitically letting this out, the countess had shown the cause of these tears. She had seen with what perfect corectness her niece had treated Barton's too pronounced admiration; yet her jealousy on Lord Tilbury's behalf had prompted the suspicion, quick as lightning, that there must have been some previous indiscretion or unconscious familiarity on her niece's part, or the young man would never have so far forgotten his position. Lady Blanche, for all she was not an accomplished worldling, traced the threads of this little movement on the part of her aunt quite accurately, and a certain annoyance and defiance against it arose in her heart. Thus, by a series of the minutest and most petty provocations, the two women who loved each other with such sincerity, and had not an atom of a desire to be other than true and loyal to their affection, were gradually working up to a crisis of discord.

For Lady Blanche tossed her head, and there was a fine movement of her delicate nostrils which meant mischief. She did not condescend to laugh off her aunt's suspicion, which was the most politic course, or explain it away, which was the proper thing to do; but she boldly accepted the imputation and proceeded to defend it—a course which can only be characterized by us, who know the exact state of affairs, to have been most tortuous and vexatious. But this comes of "putting up the monkey" of a spoiled young belle. She retorted upon her aunt, whose remark the reader will find, we fear, in the preceding page.

"George Barton, my dear aunt, is the son of a gentleman whom my father speaks of as one of the best friends he ever had. He said so only last night at dinner. He also said that the son was as worthy as his father, only that he was far more able and certain to have a brilliant career. Charlie and I have known him almost ever since we were in long clothes, and at Selby, since he became a man, he has always been received as a friend. In my opinion, I freely confess that no man of his age or near it whom I have met is able to hold a candle to him." The countess started, and examined her niece with a face of almost tragic anxiety. "I mean, of course," continued the young lady, "as regards knowledge and talent and all that. There are men of more distinguished air and higher breeding, but very few of greater distinction."

"Why, my dear Blanche," cried the countess, who during this long speech had had time to collect herself, and to recognize the danger of the ground on which they were treading, "I must say you are very chivalrous in defense of your *protégé*, and you do it very well. It is fortunate there is no one but your discreet old aunt here to listen to you. I happen to know that your partisanship is perfectly disinterested, because I only yesterday was the recipient of your confidences"—Lady Blanche's face became crimson, for this hit was palpable—"but other people might mistake you. Don't let us pursue the subject, if it is disagreeable to you. I will own that Mr. Barton is a concentrated and triple extract of all the virtues, and an admirable friend for Charlie; but don't encourage him to look at you like that, my dear, or you may make a wreck of a very worthy young man."

Thus the countess—adroitly, some people would think—tried to soothe the young lady's irritation; but really the efficacy of this somewhat ironic tender of peace from the other side, before the quarrel was actually engaged, was *nil*. It shut up the young lady for the moment, and so far was a diplomatic victory; but we know how often, in a higher field, the moral effect of the superiority gained in an epigrammatic contest among diplomatists has been reversed and destroyed by the stronger arguments of "force and arms."

"Now," said the countess, the expression of her face changing to one of seriousness and affection, "my dear, let us talk of something else, which lies much nearer my heart. Poor dear Edward, thank God, is, so the physicians tell me, out of danger—unless indeed something should excite him." (A slight stress on these words.) "Now let us talk together as mother and daughter. Since your own mother died, no one has been more intimate with you than I—no one, I am persuaded, knows you better or loves you better than I do"—the countess leaned over and took Blanche's hand and held it in her own, caressing it softly.

The young lady tried to force herself to exhibit some reciprocal cordiality, but found it impossible. For the moment she was on her guard; she resolved that she would not be entrapped into any display of feeling which might give rise to false hopes. She therefore received her aunt's demonstrations with an attitude which might be designated an affectionate passivity.

"No one loves you better than I do," pursued the countess; "and the step you took yesterday, though to any one who did not

know you as well as I do it might seem to be very strange and romantic, proved to me how sincerely you value and reciprocate my affection."

"That, my dear aunt," said Lady Blanche, warmly, as she kissed the cheek of the stately woman beside her, "did not require any fresh demonstration, I hope."

"No; but this peculiar 'demonstration,' as you call it, was one that I had no right to look for, one which only a girl of your rare force of character and independence would make; and although I am far from approving of it in the abstract"—the countess smiled—"it was very pleasant and touching in the concrete. Now, my dear, yesterday I took the only right and honorable course. I should never have forgiven myself—however strong the temptation—had I taken advantage of your romantic generosity and young inexperience to bring about a result which I desire and pray for with all my heart and soul. I have looked society through and through, and, question of fortune and all that quite apart, I tell you, though you are my own niece, there is no woman whom Tilbury could find so worthy to be his wife, and to fill the high station to which it has pleased God to call him."

The countess still had about her some of those old-fashioned superstitions which now charm the hearer because of the contrast of the naïve and simple archaic oddity with the neat, exact precision of modern skepticism.

Lady Blanche remained silent. She would gladly have given up every hope she had of fortune to have recalled or wiped out that act of yesterday. The difficulty she now had to encounter was how to reconcile her altered tone, attitude, feelings of to-day, with that impulsive effusion; how to explain to her aunt that in twenty-four hours her generous feelings had all vanished, and given place to a solemn conclusion that she had made a mistake—one that must not be repeated under any inducements. She trembled as she thought how nearly impossible it was to make the countess a confidante of the train of influences which had effected so sudden a change in her feelings, or, to speak more accurately, had so suddenly chilled the enthusiasm of her self-devotion. Lady Tilbury would look upon her as hopelessly volatile, and frivolous, and Blanche's conscience added, "with very good reason."

"Now yesterday," continued the countess, "I was not so certain—though I was tolerably sure of the state of Edward's feelings toward you—as I am to-day. Dearest Blanche," said the countess, drawing the girl's head down on her bosom, and thus concealing the scarlet blushes which began to mantle her young cheeks, "he has spoken to me very freely, and there is no doubt that the feelings he entertains for you are such as you would desire to find in the man who was to become your husband, those of deep and strong affection. In fact, he put it in his own blunt way—'Blanche or nobody.' I, of course, did not breathe a word to him of what had passed between us."

Blanche started. She did not like this apparently needless denial of what would have been a shameful breach of confidence.

"Oh, I should think not, Aunt Dora!"

The countess certainly had "not breathed a word to him of what

had passed between them." She had been quite loyal and true as regarded that incident; but, to encourage and please her son, she had allowed him to gather from something she said, without contradicting him, that she thought Lady Blanche would not be indisposed to give a favorable ear to his pretensions. Had she broken faith? It is like one of those questions of social casuistry with which "Vanity Fair" amuses and bothers its readers, when the most unsatisfactory thing of all is the "correct" answer.

"Well now, dearest Blanche," continued the countess, "the matter has become serious, for his brain is overexcited, and consequently this idea, which I dare say was occupying it at the moment the accident occurred, perhaps had been doing so for a long time, has suddenly revived with extraordinary force and intensity. He asks to see you, Blanche. We must humor him. You must at least try to brace yourself up to the effort." Lady Blanche released herself from her ladyship's arms, and jumping to her feet, listened to her with startled attention. "Don't be alarmed; I only ask you to see him, and let him talk to you for a few minutes. You need not commit yourself. I adhere to what I said yesterday—do not give your hand where your heart is not engaged; but oh, Blanche! I do wish, with all my heart and soul, that you could love him, and be happy together!" The countess clasped her hands in a gesture half of anguish, half of prayer.

Lady Blanche had turned pale; her fingers were nervously twisted together. All the peril of her position was as clear before her as a southern landscape in the noon of day.

"Dear Aunt Dora," she said, putting her hands on her heart, "I don't know what to say. You know—yesterday—I told you exactly how I was prompted; I am afraid I was very silly—not romantic—but downright foolish—prompted by some stupid idea of sacrifice—arising partly, also, I fear, from utter weariness of the part I have to play in society, and the importunities of a lot of idiots. I hate the whole lot of them!" she added, with savage energy.

"My dear, my dear!" cried the countess, "really such expressions are quite too decided."

"Never mind, Aunt Dora, it is true. Well, we are not talking of them. But you know, aunt, just like yourself, you declined to take advantage of my chivalrous humor, and you set me thinking, by what you said, about the serious and dangerous nature of the step I had so thoughtlessly taken, and—of my dear mother's words and ideas."

"Ah," said the countess to herself, while a chill went through her, "yes; her mother was too romantic. There was that affair of the young *attaché*—Baron Troppau. If she once begins to act on her mothers's words and ideas—why"—and her thoughts paused on the edge of a gulf which some people call "It's all up!"—"she might even take to that young Barton!"

Quite unconscious of her aunt's soliloquy, Blanche continued:

"She always impressed on me the duty of respecting my own heart—of putting a proper estimate on the value of that affection which it was my own right to give or to withhold, of guarding myself carefully from making any mistake as to my real feelings, and

of not allowing any merely external or social considerations to mislead my judgment."

"That, my dear," said the countess, brusquely, "was a '*fad*' of your mother's—a vulgar word, but permit me to use it; and that last sentiment requires to be taken with many qualifications. External and social considerations, I can tell you, have an immense deal to do with the sympathy and the happiness of two people who are linked together irrevocably for their life-time, and, if they are not everything, they can not safely be disregarded. I never knew them to be treated with contempt, or absolutely overlooked, without causing unhappiness, and sometimes even crime and wrong-doing. These words, I fear, are your own words, my dearest Blanche, and an exaggeration of your mother's principles. But here, you know, all her friends thought that she was sometimes a little erratic in her views on those questions."

"You can not wonder, Aunt Dora, if I think she was perfect, and I only wish I could share all her good qualities at the expense of her faults, if she had any. Thank Heaven I can remember nothing of her that was not supremely noble and generous! Next to her, I put you among my household gods; but if you love me, or would continue to hold the first place in my heart of all my living idols, you will never breathe a single breath on the memory of my dear mother."

Everything was noble and touching about this little speech, as the countess remarked, admiring the words, the tone, the attitude, the emotion which trembled on the lips and sparkled dew-like on the long lashes of the violet eyes. The elder lady rose and drew the girl to her bosom, where for a minute or two, in the revulsion of her overcharged feelings, the beauty of the season relieved herself by a little storm of sobs and an April shower of tears. The countess was quite conquered. She felt that this was no ordinary heart which throbbed against her own, no commonplace woman, whose chief qualities lay in the frail loveliness of outer form and the charms of expression, but a true, fine type of a noble race. She was all the more to be coveted for a daughter-in-law; but the mother then vowed that nothing should induce her to do aught to disturb the free action of this pure and generous nature.

"Would that I were blessed with such a daughter as you, my own loved Blanche!" said the countess, as a tear dropped from her cheek and mingled with those of her niece; "but only if your own heart and will come with you. Only trust me freely, and all that I can do to secure you the perfect happiness you deserve shall be done."

Peace having thus been proclaimed, the two women engaged in a long conversation, in which Lady Blanche frankly disclosed to her aunt the state of her heart, as she had analyzed and determined it only a few hours before. One thing she did not refer to: it was the interesting figure of George Barton, which had so shadowy and furtive a place in her thoughts that she did not deem it necessary to advert to it. Blanche did not yet herself know why that earnest longing had come upon her to keep her heart free—for what spirit-guest it was that the fair apartment was to be swept and garnished.

Outwardly preserving a perfect composure, but with an inward

trepidation, Lady Blanche accompanied the countess to the magnificent apartment where all that wealth could do to make sickness tolerable, and even luxurious, had been done with the joint help of science and affection. Perfect quiet, a cool subdued light, an atmosphere charged with reviving odors, all the apparel of a sick-chamber laid out neat and ready to hand, and two sweet-faced Sisters of St. John, in their sober but elegant costume, moving about with grace and gentleness. At a sign they noiselessly vanished, after an admiring and sympathetic glance at the fair apparition that came to bring a fresh life and brightness into the chamber of suffering.

The young earl, pale and feeble, lay propped up by the pillows, and surrounded by the dazzling whiteness of the finest linen, with his eyes half shut and his features in repose. The glow of manly health had gone from his face, and the boyish fullness from his cheeks, while his close-cut hair gave to his tall forehead an even greater expansion than ordinary, the whole making him appear several years older than before his accident. There was also, Blanche quickly noticed, a gravity in his expression and in his manner of speaking which was quite new.

His face lighted up as his eyes turned toward the young girl, who, gliding silently to his bedside, took his hand and pressed it affectionately.

"Poor old Dolly!" she said.

This was the nickname by which he was called by his cousins and intimates, and which had followed him on the turf. It probably, like most nicknames, owed its origin to the fact that it had no precise applicability to the person on whom it had been fastened, or it may have been given him because of his exquisite attention to costume and toilet. On her lips, used and spoken with the prettiest and finest tact, because it went to the extreme limits of cousinly familiarity without implying any deeper feeling, it made him smile. Then he said, gravely, still holding her hand,

"Dolly is dead, Cousin Blanche. How good of you to come! It makes me feel better to see you!"

He held her hand tightly in his white, thin, but still nervous fingers, while he devoured her face with his eyes, the blue depths of which sparkled with pleasure.

"What do you mean?" she said, with a little forced laugh to cover the awkwardness of her position, for she had not the heart to draw away her hand just then.

"I shall rise from this bed, dear cousin, a different man. That's what I mean. My stud will be put up at Tattersall's as soon as ever I can give the order. The turf will know Dolly no more. I will try and make myself more worthy of the affection and respect of souls that are nobler and better than mine."

He looked at her with a grave earnestness; there was no mistaking the language of his eyes.

She had not returned the speaking pressure of his hand, and almost involuntarily, and feeling embarrassed by the position, she made a move to draw it away. His eyes fell; he raised the little hand to his lips, and let it drop. He knew his fate was decided.

The countess, with her hand on her heart and her breath held in, followed the minutest details of this little scene with eager eyes, and

she read its meaning with the sibylline inspiration of maternal solicitude. She was astonished at the calmness with which her son, begging Blanche to take the chair by his side, asked her a few questions about her occupations, with one or two mischievous allusions to men whose attentions to her had been conspicuous. Then suddenly he said,

"By the way, have you seen George Barton?"

He turned his eyes, which had been moving about with a sick man's restlessness, full upon his cousin's face as he put the query, and in spite of herself, to her horror and vexation, she felt the warm blood fly to her cheek as she replied,

"He was here just now at lunch with the earl."

"George Barton here!" cried the young peer, turning his glance upon his mother. "I should like to have seen him."

The countess attributed Lady Blanche's warm color to the little controversy they had had down-stairs, but she commanded her own face admirably, and now spoke kindly of "that person."

"Oh, I wish I had known it, my dear boy; I thought it would have been painful to you. He is very busy with the earl just now. We will try and get him to come and see you. Blanche, you can manage that."

"I will tell the earl to bring him again," replied Blanche, with a slight confusion of manner, for this *volte-face* of the countess was really too shamefully immoral! "He seems to have taken his father's place, and become the earl's right-hand man. They were together till one o'clock this morning, and they are together now. He suffered dreadfully last night when he heard the sad news you—"

The countess's finger went up to her lips in a quick, terrified movement. But it was too late.

"What!" cried the young earl, starting uneasily. "Then it was?—old Barton, then, is dead! Mother—Blanche—tell me the whole truth. It only worries me with excitement trying to make out how I came to be here."

After giving him a rapid sketch of the facts, the countess rose hurriedly, and giving Lady Blanche a sign to retire, crossed the room to summon the two nursing Sisters.

Blanche gave her hand once more to her cousin, and once more he raised it to his lips.

"Cousin Blanche," he said, in a voice thrilling with emotion, but with a soft and gentle pleading in his eyes, "forgive a poor sick cousin's fancy, and leave him a blessing which will do no wrong to the virgin purity of your heart. Give me one kiss on my forehead before you go."

There was an instant's hesitation, but looking into his eyes she read there the epitaph of a hopeless passion.

She stooped quickly and kissed his brow.

"Thank you!" he said; and he closed his eyes.

Blanche silently left the room. She knew that nothing had happened which ought to alter her decision in the least, and yet—her heart had almost melted.

The countess, who had stopped to give some directions to the nurses, returning to the room found that Blanche had left. She approached the bed unperceived. The young earl, his eyes shut,

lay with a calm face, on which there was the passing radiance of a smile. From underneath the closed lids a tear had escaped and coursed down his cheek.

She kissed it away.

"Can you bear it, my son?" she whispered.

"I can bear anything now to make her happy. Mother, I did not know before how much I loved her."

As the countess, after pressing his hand with maternal warmth and sympathy, was turning away, he spoke again:

"Please ask Blanche not to forget to send Barton to see me. I want to see him soon—to-morrow."

The countess was rather puzzled by the earnestness of the young earl's insistence in this matter, and, as she was revolving it in her mind while leaving the room, she suddenly exclaimed to herself,

"By the way, Collops told me that Mr. Barton had called and asked to see me yesterday. What does it mean, I wonder? I am not aware of any reason why he should wish to—unless—no, surely—impossible! Just now—and with all that anxiety about his father. I must see him and find out what he has to say. It is quite mysterious!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE NET TIGHTENING.

In the *coupé*, as it was being driven rapidly from Scotland Yard to Grosvenor Place, a few words had been exchanged between the earl and George Barton, which, in order to form a true conception of the psychological phenomena of this day—so remarkable, so critical, big with the destinies of so many of the characters whose fates, long in preparing, seemed to have become concentrated within the circle of this week of passion—it is essential that the reader should overhear.

The earl spoke first.

"Barton," he said, "I know that the step I have just taken is not consistent with the understanding we came to last night that we were to do nothing without consulting each other."

"I was going to remark," said Barton, "that however grateful your kind action was to my feelings, I should, had I been consulted, have suggested to you a more cautious manner of going to work. I have not yet given up the hope that your secret may be kept out of the proceedings which must be taken to bring these men to book."

"Nor I," said the earl, "though I am puzzled to see how!"

"Your generous move to-day certainly makes it more difficult. That man Sontag is a keen detective. He already suspects more than he owns to us. I ought to tell you, my lord—forgive me for putting it in words—I gathered, from his language to-day, that he suspects you are in some way connected with others in this melancholy business."

The earl's face flushed, for his pride naturally revolted against the idea of being an object of suspicion to an agent of the police.

His brow grew dark, his lips trembled. For a minute or two he looked silently out of the window. He could not speak.

George Barton was sorry to have inflicted this pain, but it was an intimation which, having regard to the footing on which he now stood with the peer, it would have been cowardly and wrong for him to suppress.

"Thank you," said the earl, presently—"thank you. It is well I should know this, however sharply it wounds me. I shall have to swallow much bitterness before my error is purged—if ever it may be—if ever it may be!" he added, shaking his head disconsolately.

What could George Barton say—the young to the old—the inexperienced to the veteran man of the world—the humble commoner to the haughty aristocrat—who had uttered such words as these? Once the day before, in the excitement of a passionate scene, the young man had ventured to offer a word of consolation when the peer had bewailed his fallen dignity; but now, in this moment of calm despondency, he felt that both his position and his force were inadequate to the duty of offering friendly sympathy and encouragement to such a man.

So he kept silent, and the earl appreciated his delicacy; for, so trained were the peer's extraordinary faculties, that it was almost an instinct with him to observe and to judge every psychological phase of the characters with which he was in actual contact, and this even in hours of the deepest emotion. When the countess died, and his sorrow was at its height, a bishop, one of his most intimate friends, who had attended at her bedside in the last moments, remained a few days at Selby. He was a man of eminent intellect, renowned for his remarkable insight into human nature, his singular power of spiritual introspection and analysis, his sympathy, his social *finesse*, his religious worldliness. So composite and difficult a character was hardly ever submitted to human observation. Yet, amid all the sadness and preoccupation of the earl's spirit, by an almost unconscious action of the mind, he was, under peculiarly unguarded conditions, analyzing his Right Reverend friend's character; and his perception of its inner lights and shades, its profounder faults and excellencies was at that time so keen, so exact, so intense, that when, some years after, the bishop died, and the earl recalled the judgment he had then formed, he was himself astonished at the justice and accuracy of his appreciations, although they had not for one moment diverted him from his overpowering grief. The same kind of parallel action of the faculties takes place in the familiar instance of the orator when a train of thought suggested by some face in the audience is carried on in one section of the brain, while the main argument of the speech, with all appropriate emphasis and action, is being pursued with uninterrupted clearness and force. But the earl's faculty was much finer in degree.

Having reflected for a few minutes, and recovered his calm, he turned to his companion and said,

"You are young to be a witness of these emotions, the confidant of these painful and compromising secrets; but I am gratified to see how modestly you face so novel an experience. I have for long been accustomed to measure the true capacity of a man by the conscious or unconscious estimate he forms of his own forces. The

conscious estimate, which is only the developed *gnōthi saunton*, is usually, almost always, exact and trustworthy—if here and there it fails from weakness of intelligence; the unconscious is the loose, indefinite estimate which leads a man both to undervalue and overvalue his own powers. The man who deliberately sits down and carefully calculates his own forces is modest and is rare. The other constantly miscalculates, and generally blunders. Just now an impulsive young man in your position would have said something to me; and as I am an old, hardened, cynical, *blasé* man of the world, would infallibly have said the wrong thing. Your silence was golden; it was deliberately adopted; it has given me a higher opinion of you, George Barton, than anything you have said or done to-day."

Even George Barton was probably unable at the moment to appreciate the exquisite tact by which the peer had extricated both of them from a painful embarrassment, but the compliment brought a grateful flush to his cheeks. He had the sense to feel that any reply he could make on the spur of the moment to such words from such a quarter would be only commonplace and inane, and he contented himself with thanking the speaker by a grateful look, which confirmed the justice of the earl's opinion.

"Now," pursued the latter, "to return to my explanation; we will, for the present, leave Mr. Sontag to nurse his suspicions, base as they are. You see that the step I took just now was hardly one about which I could fairly consult you, because you would have been placed in a very delicate position. It was clearly my duty to relieve myself at the earliest possible moment from any further responsibility for the imputations which had been publicly leveled at your father in my name, though without my consent."

"My lord, it was very generous; it was all I could have asked or wished."

"It was only right, George, and that deserves no credit; though, as the world is going in this selfish, over-cultured age, the simple right is getting so rare as to have more credit than it deserves."

"The only thing that struck me about it," said George Barton, "was, that this proceeding brings you into direct conflict with Pollard & Pollard, or at least precipitates a rupture. I thought that perhaps it might have been as well to see them first, and give them some intimation of your intentions."

"I thought of that, too," said the earl, "and there was much to be said in favor of that course; but I concluded that the bolder policy was the better—to defy them first and see them afterward. They will take it I have resolved to brave every disclosure; and that will make them very uncomfortable, especially if our suspicions are correct, for a guilty conscience is a timid one."

"What I fear," said George Barton, "is our losing our control over the grave events to which we are all hurrying. If Sontag should prematurely fix his suspicion on them, and take action, nothing could prevent you from being mixed up in the business, and, at all events, from having the arrangement with the countess brought to light before you have taken steps to settle it."

"I can hardly bare to think of it," cried the earl. "Disclosure seems inevitable. What can I do? My position is more critical

than ever. The American bonds are lost; I must make them good, besides paying off my sister's mortgage, and returning her money."

"Would it not be best to try and get the arrangement prepared by my father carried through at once, before any other steps are taken? I understood that he had been introduced by the Pollards to a banker who agreed to find the money!"

"Yes. Hackluyt, the Dutch banker."

"And," continued George Barton, "Hackluyt consented to lend a large sum on the mortgage of the Kensington Estate?"

"Yes—£100,000, which was more than was wanted to clear us, as we have paid up out of other funds the £50,000 to release the countess's bonds. We expected another £50,000 from the sale of the Stockton shares; but now you see the bonds have vanished!"

"True; but the certificates of the shares can be produced; the loss of the bonds is, I fear, irremediable. Well, my lord, you only owe the countess now £50,000 for her cash advance. You require another £50,000 to clear her Linton mortgage; and you must give your brokers an order to buy £55,000 of the United States Loan to replace her bonds, telling her frankly, but simply, that her own have been lost or mislaid. That will take £60,000 more. My father told me the bankers who were advancing the money would readily have doubled the sum on that estate of yours, with you as mortgagor."

"So he told me. Hackluyt, it seems, controls a vast capital for Dutch and other Continental capitalists, and is always looking out for good English investments."

"Then, my lord, I would venture to advise you to see him before seeing the Pollards. Explain that your agent is no more, that you wish the business concluded and the money paid immediately, and say you are prepared to accept £160,000. His solicitors, Knox, Masterman & Bullen, a very high-class firm, have already examined the title."

"But," said the earl, "the mortgage-deed prepared between them and your father is lying ready at Pollards', or ought to be, for my signature."

"Those fellows will throw all sorts of difficulties in your way, and will refuse to give it up. Hackluyt's solicitors can easily prepare a new deed for the larger sum, and when you have authorized him to direct them to do so, Pollard will see the uselessness of trying to stop it. Happily the banker is not, as they had led you at first to believe, their own client, so that you are freer to act. Fortunately, also, the title-deeds are at the Caledonian Bank, which lent you the money on Linton. You have only to instruct Hackluyt to pay off that charge and take them over, releasing Linton at once and absolutely. Thus you see you are really, so far as that arrangement is concerned, practically independent of Pollard & Pollard; and if Hackluyt, as I don't doubt he will, only increases the amount of his loan, you will be able to snap your fingers at them. That once arranged, a good deal of their power is gone, and we are free to attack them on the graver matters."

"Admirable!" cried the earl. "Your head is as clear as a diamond. I will see Hackluyt, whom I once met, this afternoon, and then go on to Pollards'. But here we are at Tilbury's. I will get

them to give us an early lunch, and you will allow me to place this carriage at your disposal to go and meet your mother, to whom you must express my sincerest sympathy. Blanche will take her a message from me this afternoon."

* * * * * * *

At about half past one o'clock Mr. Garbett entered the spacious hall of that old mansion, now No. 155 Lincoln's Inn Fields, which was occupied by the great firm of Pollard & Pollard. At the side of the hall a member of the corps of *commissionnaires* sat, boxed up in a glass case, with a sliding pane in front of him, which admitted of a parley with visitors. On the wall outside the case, but in view of the porter, was a frame exhibiting the names of the solicitors and of the head clerks of the various departments, with sliding-boards opposite to each name, on which were the words "IN" or "OUT." The word "out" was visible, at that moment against the name of both the principals of the firm.

The detective took all this in at a glance, but, with his pleasantest manner, said,

"M. Pollard?"

"Which one, sir?"

"Either."

"Both out, sir. Your name, sir, please?"

"You're not going to charge me for asking the question, I hope?" said Mr. Garbett, with a facetious air.

"No, sir; but I want to keep my register correct."

"Very well, then, you can put down the name of Garbett, on business from the Detective Department, Scotland Yard."

Mr. Garbett, as he said this, looked round as if he had come to take possession of the premises. The *commissionnaires* have a sort of fellow-feeling for the police, probably because they are a uniformed force. The porter being, moreover, like every one in the office, on the *qui vive* about Mr. Barton, who was well known by sight to most of the clerks, and well thought of by them because of his gentlemanly bearing and kindly manners, opened the door of his glass box and emerged, with curiosity in his face.

"Have you got any news, sir?" he said, in a sort of confidential whisper.

"News about what, my friend? I didn't come here to see you."

The words were rough, but Mr. Garbett's head was on one side, and his face was cunningly good-natured.

"Well," said the porter, smiling," about poor Mr. Barton, you know, sir?"

"Did you know him?"

"Yes. As nice a gentleman as ever entered the office—always pleasant and smooth-spoken."

"Well, we have news of him," said Mr. Garbett.

"Lor' bless my soul. You don't say so now? Where is he?"

"Did he come here often?" Mr. Garbett meant to have pay for each particular item of information conveyed in an item from the other side.

"Very frequent of late, sir. Well, now, to think of that! So you've found—"

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Garbett, "he's in kingdom come, poor fellow. By the way, Mr.—ah! yes—what's your name?"

"Battersby."

"Ah! Battersby!" Mr. Garbett fixed the name in his tenacious memory. "Hum! I believe, Mr. Battersby, he was here, your people have informed us, the very day before he disappeared?"

"I can tell you, sir," said the willing porter, supposing he was only doing his duty in giving information to a Scotland Yard gentleman, "it'll be down in my book." He brought out his book, with an endless list of names entered day by day for almost every minute of the day, and running down the pages with his finger arrived at "3.35, Mr. Barton."

"Here it is, sir," he said; "Wednesday, the 25th—the very last time he was in this office."

"He did not call on Thursday, now?"

"No sir. You can see for yourself."

Mr. Garbett saw for himself.

Mr. Garbett having got his new acquaintance into a gossiping humor, stood there chatting and asking him a number of questions, the purport of which will appear hereafter. Meantime the *commissionnaire* had resumed his seat, and was dotting down the names of the people who were coming and going.

"So he's dead, sir," he said to Mr. Garbett, who stood at the open door of his crystal den. "Poor man, how did he die?"

"You know the 'Regent Circus mystery?'—that's Mr. Barton."

Mr. Battersby manifested his astonishment by a gaping speechlessness.

"Yes, Mr. Battersby—gone off like a firework—a human squib—Mr. Battersby—such is life, sir; such is life!"

"Ay," said Battersby, shaking his head and catching the infection of commonplace sentiment, "we never know whether we are in life or in death."

There was a curious movement in Mr. Garbett's large globes, it was impossible for them to twinkle.

"I won't discuss that last sentiment with you," he said. "But, tell me: is there no one in the office I can see on this business?"

"I don't know, sir. Mr. Kelk, the chief clerk's door, is up that corridor on the right. Or, why don't you go directly upstairs to the principals' rooms and ask in the outer office? See Mr. Grayson."

This was exactly what Mr. Garbett wanted.

"Mr. —— I beg your pardon?"

"Grayson."

"Grayson? Very good."

Mr. Garbett proceeded upstairs and entered the outer office, where Mr. Grayson was anchored, as usual, at his desk, and two other clerks were scratching away.

Mr. Grayson was rather startled when he saw the detective, whose visit he considered to be distinctly inopportune, and in violation of solemn pact. But Mr. Garbett, not seeming to notice him, took off his hat and addressed a junior clerk.

"Mr. Grayson?"

The old man took the cue, and replied,

"I am Mr. Grayson, sir."

"Oh! Beg pardon. I was referred to you down-stairs by the porter for information when I could see either of your principals on business of pressing importance? Mr. Garbett, sir, from the Detective Department, Scotland Yard, business relating to the disappearance of Mr. George Barton."

"Unfortunately, sir, they are both out. Mr. Charles has gone down to his country-house—we are expecting him soon; Mr. Joseph may be in any minute. Perhaps you will step into the waiting-room?"

And Mr. Grayson opened a door, motioned to Mr. Garbett to enter, and, following him in, closed it again.

The detective's face immediately relaxed. He smiled and held out his hand.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Grayson? Wasn't that well done? Why, you're a trump, man! You ought to have been a detective; your face was a masterpiece!"

Mr. Grayson shook hands, but the detective saw that his response to this cheery greeting was far from effusive—in fact, was positively constrained; for Mr. Grayson had been thinking a good deal over that first interview with the detective, and, though he had spent that ten pounds, it had somehow left a bitter flavor in his mouth.

"Did you wish to see me?" he said. "I—I thought it was arranged that you would communicate with me by letter? And, by the way, you said your name was Dillon!"

"So it was, my honorable friend," replied the detective, coolly; "to-day it is Garbett, and I did not come to see you, but your principals—with a letter which requires answering—and I mean to wait for the answer; but, as I was referred to you below, and no one knows of any communication between us, there can be no harm in our improving the shining hour—eh?—as I want an item or two of information—quite unimportant—you needn't be alarmed. Don't tell me anything you don't like, you know. I've got a letter here asking for a list of those documents that disappeared with Mr. Barton; of course only one of the partners could give that to me."

"Yes. We know nothing about it out here. There's been a good deal of trouble about them. But, to tell you the truth, we all think there's been some mistake. Mr. Kelk, our chief clerk, was saying to me only this morning that he didn't believe Mr. Barton ever ran away with those papers. Mr. Kelk knows what they are."

"But of course you know they've been found?"

Mr. Garbett, as he said this, peered sharply at Grayson.

"Found!" cried Grayson, with so evident an astonishment that Mr. Garbett was satisfied. "What! Have you discovered them, then?"

"Do you mean to say," said Mr. Garbett, "that Mr. Kelk did not know of it?"

"Certain he didn't, or he would not have spoken as he did. He was in here only an hour ago, and we were gossiping about it."

"Why, Mr. Grayson!" said Mr. Garbett, suddenly planting himself in front of the clerk, with his hands on his hips, and fixing him with his enormous eyes—"why, Mr. Grayson, the chief commissioner has had a letter from Messrs. Pollard & Pollard within the

last two hours stating that those papers were found, here, in this office, only this morning, mislaid or overlooked on your senior's table!"

Grayson's under-jaw dropped, and he gazed at Mr. Garbett with an expression of puzzled astonishment. He could not speak for a moment or two, and the detective, continuing to scrutinize his face sharply, could see that apprehension, doubt, suspicion, were following upon surprise. Mr. Grayson was evidently recalling and piecing together things that had happened under his eyes, and it was clear that, whatever the thoughts which resulted from this rapid ratiocination, they troubled him. He was of too poor a mental fiber to hide his anxiety or his curiosity.

"A letter saying they have found the papers?" said he.

"Certainly—on the table of one of the firm."

Grayson said nothing by way of comment on this statement, but Mr. Garbett did not require that he should say anything, for it was plain enough that the clerk regarded the statement with incredulity. However, Grayson made a feeble effort to diplomatize.

"You see," he said, "all that business is extra-confidential, and none of us knows much about it."

"Oh, it's all right," cried Mr. Garbett, cheerily. "In such a big business as yours, papers must very often go astray. But, as they were found here, of course Mr. Barton brought them here."

"No doubt. He took a large bag of papers into Mr. Joseph's room—let's see—it was yesterday week—but such a bagful as that, of course, couldn't get mislaid."

"No; but did he leave the whole bagful?"

"He must have done. The bag was crushed up under his arm empty when he went away."

"Ah! well, then, it was only a part of them, no doubt, that the advertisement alluded to."

Mr Grayson was reflecting.

"It's strange," he said. "I never knew any valuable papers mislaid in this office before. Everything is regularly docketed and kept in its place."

"Oh! but in a big business like this papers accumulate—briefs, deeds, and so on—eh? I know the sort of thing—tables piled up with them."

"Our business is so large that we can't do it in that way. There is a place for everything, and everything in its place. The partners' tables are cleared every evening of everything not directly in hand. The reason I am bothered about it is that I am the one who is to blame if there has been any oversight, for I attend to that duty."

"Ah! Mr. Grayson, Mr. Grayson, you're getting old. You have overlooked them," said Mr. Garbett, with a facetious leer at the clerk.

"No," said old Grayson, who was obstinate in his conceit of his own impeccability, "it is not possible. Mr. Charles must have locked them up in his desk by mistake, and turned them out this morning."

The detective was perfectly satisfied to learn this much, and he did not push inquiry on this point any further. Mr. Barton had brought a big bag, full of papers, which, in Mr. Grayson's opinion,

it was impossible to have mislaid in any case, and Mr. Grayson vouched for the fact that they could not have been overlooked in the partners' rooms in the manner suggested in their letter to the chief commissioner.

At this point one of the junior clerks put his head in at the door, and said,

"Mr. Grayson, the senior's come in."

The old clerk started, and, begging the detective to wait, went to announce him to Mr. Joseph Pollard. Evidently the solicitor did not regard the visit with gratification, for he turned paler than he was by nature, and before he had collected himself the words had escaped him in a sharp and querulous voice,

"What does he want? We have written them fully;" but, re-advising himself, he said, "well, show him in, Mr. Grayson."

The detective, as he came in, being on the lookout, surprised an anxious glance at him from behind Mr. Pollard's *pince-nez*, but the solicitor put on an easy manner, and invited him to take a seat. This Mr Garbett did, after deliberately taking out of his breast-pocket a huge pocket-book, unwinding a yard or two of what looked like black shoestring, and extracting a letter, which he handed in silence to the solicitor.

Breaking it open with a nervous hand, Mr. Pollard ran his eyes rapidly over the two pages, and Mr. Garbett saw that he changed color. His face flushed hot, and became very pale again. He appreciated in a moment the fine, ironic flavor of Mr. Sontag's epistle, and his queasy conscience felt a sickening sense of peril; for the independent action of the earl was so sharp a slap in the face, so clearly inconsistent with the line assumed by him—Joseph Polla... —in his letter to the chief commissioner, and, moreover, the demand to see the papers alleged to have been lost was so odd and so suspicious that he could hardly sit quiet in his chair, and had the greatest difficulty in the world in preserving a semblance of composure. And there was the uncomfortable figure of Mr. Garbett perched on the edge of the seat, his head on one side in his favorite attitude, and his huge, glassy eyeballs staring at him. To keep himself in countenance he reread the letter, this time very slowly. Then he looked over his glasses at Mr. Garbett, who, meantime, had been satisfying himself by a glance round the room that Mr. Grayson had told him the truth, and that the "vast quantity of law-papers" alleged to be lying in the room of the senior partner was apocryphal. A large number of briefs on a table in the center of the room were arranged in the most perfect order, and a glance showed that it was hardly possible to mislay any considerable bulk of papers amid that careful array of documents.

"Your name is—?" inquired Mr. Pollard.

"Stated in the letter, sir—Garbett, of the Detective Department."

"You are aware of the contents of this letter?"

"Mr. Sontag read it to me before placing it in my hands."

The solicitor was eying the detective very closely, and the latter, accustomed to reading all the little signs of nervousness and anxiety in the faces of men who were fencing with him, saw very clearly that, beneath the practiced calm of Mr. Joseph Pollard's manner, there was a profound emotion and disquiet. Mr. Garbett

never took those large globes of his, with their glassy stare, from the solicitor's face for an instant.

"H'm!" said Mr. Pollard, clearing his throat, affected by a sudden dryness, while he tried to get up a smile, which, however, was a dismal failure, and continuing to watch Mr. Garbett with a suspicious side glance, which the other fully appreciated. "You seem to have jumped to a conclusion very rapidly with regard to Mr. Barton's—a—fate."

The detective, though the solicitor paused here, evidently expecting some remark, remained silent, motionless, always staring.

Mr. Pollard began to feel irritated by this imperturbable attitude—precisely the effect Mr. Garbett wished to produce, as experience had shown him that an angry man was likely to make some movement which would disclose the weakness of his game.

"I remarked," said Mr. Pollard, raising his voice, "that your Department seem to have arrived at a conclusion about Mr. Barton's fate which appears to be very improbable and hasty. What proof have you got of this?"

A mighty movement of all the lower part of Mr. Garbett's face indicated a sort of derisive pity for Mr. Pollard, if he really supposed that a detective was going to answer such a question as that. He simply said,

"There is no doubt about it, sir, from information which we have received. You see your own client has no doubt about it."

This was straight out from the shoulder, and damaged the solicitor badly.

"So I see," replied Mr. Pollard, quickly, "but what is the nature of the information?" His voice and manner were a little eager.

Mr. Garbett smiled his most engaging smile, which was indeed terrible.

"For the present, Mr. Pollard, of course, that is a secret."

"What? to us, Mr. Garbett, who are interested—who have given you the instructions?"

"Beg pardon, Mr. Pollard; I understood your instructions were withdrawn."

"Well—of course—in a sense—that is so. Acting to the best of our judgment—on behalf of our client—we wrote you that letter this morning. It appears that—probably having received some unexpected information—our client has personally given directions in the sense conveyed by this letter; but of course we are still acting as his solicitors, and we ought to be informed of all that is going on, because we may be able to help you materially in elucidating this—suicide, I suppose it was, if indeed it should turn out to be true."

"It is not a suicide, Mr. Pollard," said Garbett, his huge eyeballs seeming to glow like the lamps of a railway engine. "It was beyond all question—a murder, sir!" It was impossible for Mr. Pollard to repress a shiver at the word. "May I ask, sir, whether you have seen your noble client this morning?"

"Really, Mr. Garbett," said the solicitor, putting on a severe air of rebuke to the impudence of the detective, "I fear you forget, sir, whom you are addressing! I don't suppose the chief commissioner sent you here to cross-examine us about our private business. You

will excuse me from answering such a question, and we will keep, if you please, strictly to the matter in hand."

"The matter in hand, Mr. Pollard," said Mr. Garbett, inclining his head a little more on one side, "is the discovery of the murderers of Mr. George Barton, for which £2000 reward has been offered by your client, the Earl of Selby, of which I am determined, if I can, to get a share. Any question which tends to throw light on that crime is relevant, and, as you claim to be acting with us in this matter, we assume that you will give us every facility for obtaining full information. My question, which you take as an impertinence, was meant as nothing of the kind. It arose out of your own statement. You said that, in withdrawing your charge against Mr. Barton, and informing us that you took no further part in the investigation as to this gentleman's fate—with whom, by the bye, we are well aware that you have lately been conducting some very important negotiations"—Mr. Pollard's eyebrow winced slightly, and the movement was duly noted—"you were acting on behalf of and by instructions from the Earl of Selby. Well, sir, after your letter arrived, the Earl of Selby came to Scotland Yard, and gave directions exactly the reverse of those contained in your letter, and I simply ask you whether your client had seen you, in order to give you an opportunity of explaining."

"Which I must peremptorily decline to do!" said Mr. Pollard, shortly and hotly. "You appear, sir, to be exceeding your instructions, and we shall complain to the chief commissioner about your conduct."

"As you please, Mr. Pollard," said Mr. Garbett, with provoking coolness, "but, in the meantime, my specific instructions are to wait for a list of those documents, and not to return to Scotland Yard without it."

"There, again," said Mr. Pollard, getting more and more irritated, "I am unable to oblige you. The documents are private documents belonging to our client; they have nothing to do with your inquiries, and, now that they are found, there is no longer any necessity for troubling any one about them."

"That is not the opinion of my chief, Mr. Pollard. You see you offered, in your advertisement, to show a list of those documents, and we ought to have asked for it before. Now that we know that Mr. Barton has been murdered, and that those documents relate to the business which was occupying him in London, and which he was engaged in with gentlemen who one day accuse him of running away with them, and the next day find them on their office-table, you must see, Mr. Pollard, that we have some ground for inquiring that was the nature of the papers."

"I see nothing of the kind!" said Mr. Pollard. "The demand seems to me to be quite irregular. In any case I should not accede to it without referring to our client and consulting my partner, who is absent; and I must further tell you, sir, that your manner of speaking to me is distinctly impertinent, and I decline to have any more to say to you!"

Mr. Garbett rose, calm, always imperturbably staring.

"You refuse to allow me to see those papers, Mr. Pollard?"

"Most decidedly."

"You will not furnish the Department with a list and description of them?"

"As present advised, certainly not."

"You must not be surprised, then, sir, if my chiefs, knowing what they do, draw unfavorable conclusions as to your conduct. I have only done my duty. Good-morning, sir."

"They may draw any conclusions they like," said Mr. Pollard, furious. "We don't require to be instructed by the police either as to the law or our duty."

As luck would have it, just as Mr. Garbett turned to the door by which he had entered, and Mr. Joseph Pollard, who had risen to deliver the last shot with considerable heat, had turned to his desk again, another door opened at the side of the room, and Mr. Charles Pollard entered, saying,

"It's all right. I have them!"

He carried a bag in his hand. His uncle put up his finger to his lips, and Mr. Garbett, whose back was to the speaker, wheeled round instantly and faced him. He had seen Mr. Charles on two previous instances at Scotland Yard. The junior partner started when he saw him, but nodded, and said,

"Good-morning, Mr. Garbett," while he looked at his uncle as if to inquire the motive of the detective's visit.

Mr. Joseph Pollard was on thorns; for he had an instinctive feeling that the detective was suspicious, and if he remained it was just possible, since Mr. Charles Pollard knew nothing of the change in the state of affairs which had taken place during his absence, that something might be dropped of a compromising character. So he said, quickly taking up the chief commissioner's letter and thrusting it under his nephew's eyes, while he gave him a meaning look,

"Mr. Garbett's business is concluded. I have given him our answer. Good-morning, sir," he said again, significantly, to the detective.

But Garbett did not stir.

"I am glad to have seen you, sir," he said, addressing Mr. Charles Pollard, "because all our communications in regard to this business have been with you. I should just like to be assured, before I return to make my report to the chief commissioner, whether you are of the same mind as your partner in refusing the information we ask for?"

While Garbett was speaking, Mr. Charles Pollard's eye was running over the startling letter from Mr. Sontag. He glanced up at his senior inquiringly. The latter was flushed, and obviously ill at ease. He turned again to Mr. Garbett:

"You have your answer, Mr. Garbett; we will write the chief commissioner a letter in reply to this."

Mr. Charles nodded. He comprehended his uncle's anxiety, and his own could hardly be concealed.

"Yes—Mr. Garbett—my partner's answer is mine."

The detective said no more, and retired. His eyes wandered curiously over the bag which Mr. Charles Pollard had brought in his hand, and the contents of which he had designated in the plural as "them." An idea went through the detective's brain. On his way out he nodded to his friend the *commissionnaire*, and having got

as far as the steps, turned back into the hall, opened the door of the glass box, and premising--

"By the way, I forgot to ask them upstairs—there is so much to think of"—obtained some further information regarding the movements of Mr. Barton.

Upstairs, when Garbett had left the room, the two miserable men looked at each other with startled eyes and haggard faces. They began to feel that they were being gradually surrounded by an iron cage, which, like that horrible chamber in Poe's story, was closing up tighter and tighter, and threatening to crush them.

Charles Pollard had come back rather light-hearted at the cleverness of his latest move—the reproduction of the missing documents. This would divert all suspicion from them, and, in addition, give them a powerful leverage over the earl, to whom it was a matter of vital interest to have those papers. To get them out of their hands, he must either accept their terms, or resort to proceedings very compromising to himself. He must begin—Mr. Charles Pollard chuckled to himself as he thought of it—by telling the story of his own disgrace to some respectable solicitors, who would be sure to advise him at any cost to come to an arrangement. But Mr. Charles Pollard's fine air castles tumbled all to pieces in his brain as soon as his eyes had raced over that nasty letter of Mr. Sontag's. The earl had thrown them over with cool, exasperating indifference; almost any conceivable move they could make against him would be perilous for them; that they saw and appreciated with the clearness of guilty consciences excited by danger to morbid sensibility. By some mysterious means the police had arrived at the fact that the victim of Regent Circus and George Barton, the elder, were one; and there was an underlining of menace in Mr. Sontag's prose which they did not fail to perceive. To make such a request, to write in such terms to a firm like Pollard & Pollard, was in itself significant. The clever card they had played was evidently trumped; was there any other good card in their hand?

The senior, having dropped the glasses from his nose, had thrown himself into his chair, his hands deep down in his trousers pockets, his brow knitted, his lips tightly compressed, his chin on his breast, a picture of despair. Charles Pollard hardly dared to look at him, for he felt his own courage and impudence oozing out at the ends of his fingers. Neither liked to break the silence, and they could almost hear the throbbing of each others' hearts.

Charles at length said--his voice was only just above a whisper—

"What was that fellow doing here?"

"What was he doing here?" cried Joseph Pollard, in a strange, loud, strident voice. "He was trying to get evidence against you and me, Charles Pollard, for the murder of George Barton!"

"Hush—h—h!" said Charles Pollard, alarmed not only by the old man's tone, but by his manner, he seemed so desperate and excited. "You might be overheard."

"What does it matter?" replied the other, fiercely, though he lowered his tone. "We are suspected, and in a few hours we may be accused. I knew it would be so—I knew it would be so!"

"Well, Mr. Pollard," said the other, sharply, "will you at least

let me know what took place, and enable me to form an opinion about it?"

"Oh, yes," replied the other, wearily, "I'll tell you, Charles, and much good may it do you!"

He related the interview with all his practiced exactitude. Not a word escaped; for was not every syllable that had been uttered burned into his brain?

It certainly did not appear to do much good to Charles Pollard, for his face became longer and paler as his uncle proceeded.

"We must send on the list immediately," said the nephew, when his uncle had finished.

The elder shrugged his shoulders. He seemed quite paralyzed and indifferent.

"Do anything you like," he said. "It does not much matter."

"At least," said Charles Pollard, in a low voice, as he quietly locked the door leading to the clerks' room—"at least it will give us time if we decide upon bolting."

He hoped to prick up the old man's energies by this hint. And he succeeded.

"It is our only hope," said Joseph Pollard, raising his head and speaking more firmly. "Is the yacht ready?"

"Quite. I told Yates to order the fires to be kept up, and have the captain and crew all ready on board. We shall clear for Havre, but we will cut straight across for Montevideo. It is lucky I sent that money to Paris. And I have about five thousand on board in a safe place."

"We ought to leave to-night—to-night, Charlie. Mark my words, we have not a moment to spare. You should have seen how that fellow looked at me. Did you ever watch an engine with two lights coming up on the underground railway? You fancy for a long time they are stationary, and by and by you become conscious they are coming—coming—coming—nearer. I have often thought what a horrible fascination they must have for a suicide who is waiting for them. Well, I thought of that while that wretch was looking at me—there—sitting—staring like a basilisk. By G—, Charlie, I can't stand it any longer; we'll be off—to-night, Charlie—to-night!"

Joseph Pollard's own eyes seemed to be starting from his head, and the sweat was reeking on his brow.

* * * * * * *

Garbett, lounging along the pavement outside, spoke to a seedy-looking person who was hanging about by the railings opposite No. 155, and to a tall, gentlemanly-looking man who appeared to be similarly unoccupied. Having satisfied himself that the house was being watched as well from the back, where a room, looking into the yard of No. 155, had that morning been hired by a supposed agent and his clerk, he stationed himself at the Little Turnstile, leading from the Fields into Holborn, to wait for Mr. Grayson, whom he had invited to lunch. While he was curiously examining some specimens of engraving in the window of a "Heraldic office" at the corner, but at the same time keeping his eyes about him, a person came through the narrow passage from Holborn who attracted his attention. This was a tall, fashionably-dressed man, faultless

as to tailoring and general "get-up," but whose air and swagger at once revealed to the experienced eye of Mr. Garbett a jackdaw in peacock's plumes—a "flash" aristocrat. He turned round suddenly and faced this person, whose evil face, vulgarized by drink and debauch, puffed cheeks, bloodshot eyes, and furtive, uneasy glances, indicated at once a *roué*, a man about town, and a being with a cowardly conscience. The shade to bluish-red in this man's cheek and nose deepened as his eye crossed that of the detective, and each threw at the other that glance of subjective recognition which results from a desire on either side not to betray itself. As the portentous globes of Mr. Garbett turned and remained fixed on his face, the man almost instinctively halted an instant, and then, as if he had simply stopped to change his foot, he went on along the wall of Lincoln's Inn with an affected swagger of nonchalance.

The detective turned and looked after him, his face wearing for an instant or two a puzzled expression; then suddenly a light flashed in his eyes, a sardonic smile wrinkled the sheathing of his huge jaw.

"Captain Yates!" he said to himself. "The fellow we so nearly nabbed in that Colorado silver-mine business and the Melton Club case—as thorough a swindler and blackleg as walks the streets of London. That gentleman is so near the edge of criminal culpability that it wouldn't require a single stride of his long legs to take him right over, if he hasn't gone across on the sly already. By Jove! I never thought of it before! He is the very man to have arranged such a job as this for the Pollards. It's very strange the idea should come into my head. What is he doing down here, I wonder? Unfortunately he recognized me, and I can't follow him up. Ha! precisely, sir; I thought you'd do that!" cried Mr. Garbett to himself, while he stood apparently still engaged in studying the heraldic ensigns which the ingenious firm of engravers had concocted for successful judges and barristers.

The man, lounging slowly down the pavement, swinging his cane, had stopped at the great gate of Lincoln's Inn, and, turning quickly, had cast a sly glance along the wall to see whether he was being observed or followed. Mr. Garbett felt pins and needles pricking him all over and urging him to follow the captain, but a moment's reflection showed him it would be quite futile. He was known to the man, and the approaching interview with Grayson was too important to be given up for a mere fishing expedition.

"No matter," he said to himself; "I can find your address, my fine gentleman, and I shall put a man on to watch you to-night. Ha! Mr. Grayson," he said, in a low voice, without turning round, "don't speak to me. Go on through the Turnstile to Izant's, and I'll follow you. The fellow's probably got his eye on me still," he said to himself.

Had Garbett been able to put on the hat of Fortunatus and follow his man, he would have been astounded at his own remarkable intuition. The captain passed through Lincoln's Inn, and turning back along Carey Street, took a careful squint up Serle Street to see whether his natural enemy was still in the horizon. Mr. Garbett had, however, disappeared. Crossing Serle Street, the captain held on his way to Clement's Inn, and entering one of its dingy houses, climbed the stairs to a set of chambers under the tiles, on the outer

door of which was painted the indeterminate name of "Mr. Smith." Thence a few minutes afterward a boy, of a sharp and hungry countenance, bore a letter, in a crested envelope, addressed by a bold but shaky hand to Mr. Charles Pollard, and marked, "Pressing and Confidential."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NOON OF LOVE HAS STRUCK.

MRS. BARTON was a superior specimen of that vast class of superior women who are turned out of the much abused vicarages, rectories, and deaneries of England. The increase of the species is not the least useful of the good works performed by the clergy, as it is certainly by far the most successful. Were every clergyman called upon to produce for every child born in his house an individual born again, in the evangelical sense, under his preaching, not a few might find it difficult to match the colossal tale of the one by an adequate number of specimens of the other. But still he may hold up his head as one who has done much for the world, for out of these clerical homes there come forth troops of young men and women, cultured, well-bred, intelligent, laborious, accustomed to elegance of idea and economy of practice; in fact, when taken all together, constituting an immense and incalculably beneficent force in the midst of our social life.

At almost every step in society one runs against men or women, many of them eminent, most of them diligent and thoughtful workers, in every department where thoughtful work and earnest humanity can find a field of action, who are children of the clergy. The success of clergymen's sons at the universities, in all the professions, in the public services, is patent and distinguished; and yet I doubt whether a greater, wider, and more benignant influence does not emanate from the clergy homes of England, in the shape of the daughters who are trained in those wonderful schools of refinement and domestic economy. I think, if my reverend friends would not be shocked, and would not call that irreverent and profane in which there would be not the least irreverence or profanity, I could elaborate a much more unanswerable political and practical argument in favor of an established clergy, on the ground of the importance to the State of promoting the natural increase of a stock which is, morally and intellectually, of a high order, than Mr. Gladstone, for all his superb command of dialectic, ever compounded in defense of an established church.

Mrs. Barton was not only in herself a lady of exceptional intelligence and strength of character, but she had had the supreme advantage of having always lived in the society of distinguished people. Her father was the Dean of Dodchester; he had been head-master of Eton. Such a statement is enough in itself to signalize a world of eminent social and intellectual connections. Moreover, the dean owed his advancement, in no small degree, to the fact that he had been Lord Selby's tutor at Oxford, and, in marrying his daughter, Mr. Barton had no doubt laid the foundation stone for the position he afterward held in the earl's domestic polity. Mrs. Barton, there-

fore, was at home in any society, and in all she made a very interesting figure, for she was lively, clever, instructed, some thought indeed a little of a blue-stocking, and her social tact was perfect—in saying which, quite a bundle of wonderful qualities is necessarily implied. Moreover, as I think I have already hinted, she was naturally ambitious. Young as she was at the time when her father was made a dean, she had the credit of having helped him to the advancement. In Mr. Barton she had to deal with more solid stuff. His ambition was a quiet, comfortable, intellectual, but unostentatious life, and "a large family to keep one's heart warm," as he used to say. This ambition he managed to realize to perfection. George was the eldest of seven children, of whom five were sons. With him Mrs. Barton's ambition lay down and slept. He was a man of so much character in himself, so full and round, with all the finer qualities of perfect manhood, that she felt it enough to have a kingdom in his heart; and that she had, for he dearly loved her. Their children had before them the example of one of those wonderfully happy combinations and perfect dovetailings of character which stands, in the *tombola* of wedlock, in the same relation to all the other numbers as the first prize in a great Dutch lottery—that is, in about the proportion of one to a million or so.

Mrs. Barton visited with the county families around her, and, while the Countess of Selby lived, she was a familiar friend at the castle. Everywhere her perfect social tact enabled her to be at home, in the proudest and most distinguished society, without compromising her independence, her candor, or her *amour propre*.

When the Countess of Selby died, and her only daughter was left without a mother's supervision, it was inevitable that Mrs. Barton should become a kind of local tutoress and guardian to the motherless girl whenever she was at Selby Castle. From the natural charm of her character, it almost followed as a matter of course that the young Lady Blanche should conceive a very deep affection for her; and this affection became so pronounced that, sensible and good-hearted as was her real substitute mother, the Countess of Tilbury, her ladyship could not help feeling now and then just a little twinge of jealousy at the young lady's preference. This, of course, is an appreciation due to the clairvoyance of an author; for the Countess of Tilbury was far too eminent a woman of the world to allow it to be even suspected by a human being not endowed with second sight that she was ever troubled by such a feeling as jealousy of the wife of her brother's agent, however clever and *distinguée* that lady might be. This will serve partly, though not wholly, to explain that striking contrast of manner and terms between the messages given to George Barton for his mother by the countess and by Lady Blanche. The little differences in the minds of the two ladies about the messenger himself had no doubt the most to do with the discrepancy.

Now, it was here, namely, in regard to the earl's daughter, that the natural ambition of Mrs. Barton, bottled up so securely, and rendered air-tight and inevaporable by being capsuled with the sealing-wax of affection, found just a tiny and almost imperceptible vent. It was impossible that so sagacious a matron should not have discerned some faint signs of danger in George's intimacy at the

castle, in Lady Blanche's intimacy at the manor. Mr. Barton was a keen observer, too; and it is just possible that he may have scented danger in the air, and that, to his other reasons for wishing to keep his son down to a simple life, was added the desire of placing him in a situation which would force him, were he in peril of conceiving a hopeless and fatal affection, to suppress it. For Mr. Barton knew that, however eminent his son's talents and success might be, such a passion would be an utterly insane one in the eyes of the Earl of Selby. The subject, then, was eschewed all round, though in the heart of the anxious mother there was a secret mixture of terror and desire in regard to the state of her son's feelings. But, guessing the motives of her husband's policy, as her good-sense told her it was the only right and honorable one, she guarded herself from ever, by the slightest hint, or by employing any of those refined tactics which are so simple to feminine ingenuity, saying or doing anything to encourage the movements in her son's heart at which she had intuitively guessed. Happily, as she observed, Lady Blanche herself appeared utterly unconscious of any sentiment but regard for a clever and pleasant acquaintance, while George kept proudly clear of any manifestation of the state of his feelings, which was not so minute as to need the microscopic lenses of a mother's love to detect it.

Mrs. Barton had not flown to London at the first intimation which she received of her husband's disappearance, because it had come upon her in so cruel a fashion as to prostrate her, bodily and mentally, for three days, and her physician had confined her to her room. On the Thursday night George had not thought it right to send her the news; but on Friday the first act of Mr. Charles Pollard, when he had learned from the earl that Mr. Barton's absence was noticed, had been to dispatch a telegram to Manor Calham in these terms:

(Telegram.)

Pollard & Pollard, Solicitors, 155 Lincoln's Inn Fields.	to	Mrs. Barton, Manor Calham, by Selby, Yorks.

Please wire immediately whether Mr. Barton is at home. Has disappeared with a large number of bonds and important papers. Earl is very anxious. Reply paid.

This cruel and dastardly intimation, which the solicitors launched without any regard to the feelings of the poor victim, they had conceived and sent only as a clever piece of tactics. For Mrs. Barton it was more effective than a thunderbolt. It was many hours before her tottering reason recovered its equilibrium, and then, incapable of any physical exertion, she received from the doctor's hands a milder and more hopeful message which her son had thoughtfully concocted; in which he begged her to try and keep up her faith and hope, as he was taking all the necessary steps, and implored her not to leave the manor, on the ground, which George knew to be so specious, that his father might be suffering from overworked brain, and might direct his course to Selby. When the earl received the distracted letters and telegrams which the poor lady dictated to him

from her sick-bed, his natural kindness and chivalry led him to reply in reassuring terms, and George's letters just afforded the anxious doctor ground for constructing ingenious theories to appease the anguish of his patient's sorrow. She had enough perspicacity of judgment and strength of resolution left to urge the physician not to divert George's attention from the supreme business of the moment by awakening his anxiety on her account, and thus she passed nearly three days of horror, incapable alike of thought and movement.

Over the meeting between the mother and son we draw a veil, if for no other reason, because the emotions of such a scene are purely beyond the resources of language, and would be beyond the appreciation even of the finest or most sensitive genius. They belong to regions so sacred that the grandest poets and dramatists have never attempted to set foot in them, or if they have, struck with the awful and sacred solemnity of those *penetralia*, they have checked their feet and retired with silent steps. Here and there some light fools may have tried to rush in where those angels feared to tread; but the sorry futility of their efforts to paint that which manifests itself not alone in human speech, but in a mysterious spiritual language of emotion and passion, conveying its meaning from heart to heart in silent magnetic currents, along unseen chord, has only the more conspicuously pointed an imbecility so supreme as not even to be able to estimate the extent and limits of its own weakness.

But George noted with horrified surprise, and with a frightful contraction of heart, the ravages which that hurricane of grief had left on the sweet and pleasing features of his mother. She was a brunette—he took after her—and her abundant and beautiful black hair, which had been the pride of her children, was now as white as snow. Her lively and expressive features were shrunken; the bright light in the deep brown eyes seemed to have been extinguished forever.

The death of his father was a deep, irreparable sorrow. Still, it was a dread event completed—there was no aftermath of suffering for the loved one. Here, however, before him, was a melancholy ruin, with just enough of its original life and beauty left to keep alive, as the Parthenon does for the Greek, perpetual emotions of grief and indignation. When the first sad hour of commingled sorrow, of mutual explanation, was over, and George Barton began to look and look, and realize what this damnable crime had wrought upon this noble woman, the volcano of passion and wrath within his soul began to seethe and boil and glow with a fearful intensity. He lost all control of himself. So insupportable became his feelings that he broke away from his mother, and rushing to his chambers, threw himself madly on the floor, and with wild contortions of rage, with oaths and execrations, loud, deep, and terrible, such as had never entered into his thoughts or soiled his lips, he vowed and reiterated his vows of vengeance. The pent-up passions of his soul found vent in frenzied ejaculations, and proved how vast were the forces which the restraints of love, education, and self-respect had hitherto held in check within this powerful being.

Outside, the westering sun was playing upon the flowers and foliage which filled his windows, and which were softly stirring with

the inaudible breath of a summer zephyr. His two birds, pluming themselves in the sunny light, were singing in cheerful notes their evening hymn. And along the surface of the broad river a golden splendor gleamed soft and heavenly, transfiguring the smoky faces of the time-worn monuments, of the dingy buildings, the gray front of Somerset House, the fretted towers of the palace at Westminster, the floating barges and darting steamers, the long, curved, granite lines of the embankment, broken here and there by the massive silhouettes of the great bridges, and seemed to say that for all that is gloomy and evil and abject there is an hour of transformation and brightness.

Of all this he, writhing in anguish, was unconscious. The carol of the birds and the joy of sunlight could not touch a heart which was ablaze with flames of wrath and vengeance.

"Oh, mother! mother! mother! dear, dear mother! Oh, father! father! Damned and dastardly scoundrels who have done this hellish deed! Fiends! sons of Satan! whelps of hell! I curse and loathe you—all—all who have had any part in this foul crime, and all connected with them; I curse them, every soul of them, and all they love, and all they possess! May the fury and vengeance of God blast and destroy them, without one solitary exception!"

And so on—a black and bloody current of fury, turbid, wild, unrestrained, whirling on resistless, hurling along, in its foaming breakers, the wrecks and ruins of all his hopes and affections; yes, even his love for Lady Blanche, hurtled, bruised, and inanimate, in that cruel torrent. He seemed to take a pleasure in battering and spurning it. In proportion to the intensity of his idolatry was the bitterness of his satisfaction in casting it away. It seemed to be a kind of sacrificial offering to the manes of the dead, to the ruins of the living. It was a love that was accursed, because it stood between his heart, and justice and vengeance; because it had whispered of mercy, when it really involved a mean and cowardly treason to his father's memory; because it would have paralyzed the arm that should strike with unflinching severity. She! She was the earl's daughter; and in that dreadful hour the earl was the vilest of the criminals. His wrong, his paltry interests of pride and selfishness and fortune, had led to this sacrifice of two noble creatures. His agents had done the deed, and every living soul connected with him was to George Barton's disordered mind an accomplice in the crime.

Had the earl come in at that moment he would have killed him, and human justice would have struck him down for the commission of an act he could no more have controlled than he could the four winds of heaven.

No ray of moral or material light could penetrate such darkness as that. Amid the roar of such a torrent, and the thunder, and the blasting play of lightning, even an angel's voice must surely be unheard; an angel's face, however near, remain unseen!

How long this transport lasted he was quite unconscious.

Suddenly he became aware that there was some one at the entrance of his room. In his agitation in entering he had imperfectly closed the outer door of his suite of chambers. Two visitors had penetrated into the antechamber, and gently pushed open the door

of the sitting-room. Suddenly we say, George Barton looked up. His eyes in a flash took in two figures standing in the doorway, with the subdued reflection of the summer light behind them—two figures with startled, sorrowful eyes and terrified faces — Lord Charles and Lady Blanche!

He leaped to his feet. His ruffled hair stood up around his head like the mane of an angry lion; his eyes were fierce and flaming and blood-shot; his teeth and hands were clinched, and there was foam upon his lips. Instinctively he made a move as if he were going to leap at Lord Charles, who involuntarily shrunk back a step. Lady Blanche remained for an instant, with her hands clasped in horror, gazing at the terrible statue before her. Then, with a quick, piercing cry, that thrilled through George's heart—"George Barton! Oh, my God!"—she took three rapid steps, and throwing her arms round his neck, she clasped him to her heart.

At the sight of that fearful suffering, at the sudden, overwhelming conviction that his reason had lost its balance, all the unknown and undiscovered fountains of her love had been unsealed in a moment, like the waters of the rock at the touch of the prophet's wand, and, torrent for torrent, the swelling flow of crystal springs of love had come to meet the turbid waters of his wrath.

A vivid pang of anguish thrilled through George Barton's heart, swift and brief as lightning; then came a fresh hurricane of feeling, like a rushing, mighty wind, which seemed in one moment to sweep his soul's horizon clear of all the black and dense commotion which had been raging from sky to sky; and, in its place, a quick glow of sunlight filled the hemisphere. And the birds in the window, roused by the noise and movement, filled his ears with a nervous thrilling melody. Ah! he heard them now—only for an instant—never to be forgotten in his life; and then, before he could say anything, before he could return that loving pressure, the blood went back to his heart, his head drooped, he slipped out of Lady Blanche's arms and lay senseless on the floor.

"Charlie! Charlie! Oh, he is dying—water, water! quick!"

She knelt down instantly, pushing back with her hand the hair that had fallen over his clammy forehead, rapidly undoing his necktie and collar, ere Lord Charles, before whose eyes this scene had passed like a dream in one fourth of the time it has taken to tell it, recovered at the same instant his presence of mind, his judgment, and his activity.

"Blanche! Blanche, I say! You know—I mean, what does this mean?" He ran forward and seized her arm. "O Lord, I say, Blanche, go away quick—I'll attend to him—go, for Heaven's sake!"

"Water!" she said, hoarsely, shaking off his hand. "Will you go, I say? or must I fetch it?"

Her eyes and voice were so determined that Lord Charles gave way and ran into the adjoining bedroom for the water. His reflections were,

"Oh, I say! this is awful! I never suspected that. I wish to Heaven I hadn't brought her up! What will the earl say? Poor George--poor dear fellow—it was perfectly dreadful! Never saw such a thing—"

"Charlie! Charlie!"

He ran back with the water-jug. She had thrown off her bonnet and gloves, and was kneeling by Barton's side, chafing his death-cold hands in her own, so small and delicate, but warm with life and love. She was bending eagerly over his face, on which it really seemed that the dew and ghastliness of death had fallen. A thrill of fear ran through Lord Charles's frame as he looked at the face. But he was brave, and had recovered his coolness.

"Charlie, what do you think?"

"Think! I think he has fainted. Look out!"

And Blanche scarcely had time to get out of the way when a great dash of water went into the face of her lover, followed by a second and a third. Lord Charles went on one knee beside his friend. He took a hand and chafed it. Blanche took the other. Their eyes met; she became crimson. Lord Charles's eye had grown gentle. To his first surprise and pain, at the astounding move of his beloved and admired sister, to his natural and aristocratic sense of the impropriety of her conduct, and the far more serious *inconvenance* of that which it imported, there had succeeded a tenderer feeling, half sympathy, half regret for his sister, and deep sorrow for George Barton. As for her, he had read in her eye, at that moment when she so peremptorily refused to leave George's side, an irrevocable resolution, such as he had never known to succumb when once it was formed in her mind. She whom he thought impregnable, whom he had seen unmoved by the most brilliant suitors in the entire range of the nobility, loved—and she loved George Barton! That was clear as daylight, and terrible to Lord Charles as the sunshine of the desert.

"Well," he said to himself, as he rubbed away vigorously, "it's plain she loves him; and if she does, by Jove I'll stand to her."

And looking up at her face, which had grown pale again, he gave her an encouraging smile, frank and manly, and said,

"It's all right, dear Blanche. Don't be frightened. I think he is coming round."

The next moment Barton opened his eyes. They fell first upon Lady Blanche's sweet face, and then upon that of Lord Charles. Both were bent over him with tender anxiety. A slight shudder passed through his frame at the recollection of that awful dream out of which he had awakened; then the song of the birds resounded sweet and loud in his ears, a very pæan of joy. It seemed to him as if their melody had never been interrupted, and the warm blood, suddenly pulsating through his whole system, as he recalled Blanche's last act, he seized the little hand which was in his, and carried it to his lips. She blushed, a divine blush of love and virgin modesty; and Lord Charles, muttering,

"There, you are a pair of fools!" added, "Are you better, Barton? Do you think you could get up? Take his other arm, Blanche. There, you will be better on the sofa. So. Now, I say, Blanche, Blanche—he's all right now; what the deuce are we to do?"

"Charlie!" cried Lady Blanche, taking both his hands, and fixing him with a frank, appealing look of her violet eyes, "we may trust you—mayn't we?"

"Yes," replied Lord Charles, with a side glance at George, who

now, thoroughly alive to all that had passed, was looking on silent, with wonder and pain and bliss all commingled. "But I never saw such a thing in my life!"

Lady Blanche's head drooped under the curious, troubled glance of her brother, and her heart throbbed, as she recalled the strangeness and significance of the movement to which a sudden emotion had prompted her with a force that flesh and blood could not control. And yet, thrilled with the ecstasy of that quick revelation, she did not regret it. She had no time to analyze her thoughts; but to the touch of reason her heart repeated, in bell-like tones, that the noon of love had struck—and struck just and true. Yes—she loved him, she felt it now in every fiber of her being; and looking up shyly, after a moment of confusion, caused by her brother's penetrating look, she caught George's eyes fixed upon her with wondering adoration. He took her hand. Gazing in each other's faces, they lost all consciousness of anything but their own unutterable happiness. Lord Charles silently went out into the antechamber, and, leaving the door ajar, paced slowly up and down.

They were alone; the birds sung high and clear, and the rays of the sinking sun filled the room with a softened glow. The light played upon Blanche's hair, kissing the satin beauty of her cheek. She had never seemed to him more lovely. The excitement had deepened the usually gentle tint of her skin into a bright glow, and strangely quickened the crystalline beauty of her eyes; and her face was transfigured by that smile of love which owes its tender magical charm to the sadness that underlies all deep human emotion.

As yet he was hardly able to realize what had happened. He seemed to have awakened from a dreadful nightmare upon a noon of splendor and a vision of angels. He closed his eyes, and, the horrible recollections coming back to him with vivid force, he shuddered. Opening them again, the light was all around him, and she was there, looking at him with startled but tender anxiety.

"What is it, George?"

"Oh, Blanche, I love you—I love you!" He pressed her hand against his throbbing heart, throbbing now with the full pulse of life.

She knelt by his side; he threw his arms round her; their lips met in the first kiss of love, while the birds seemed to sing more shrilly and triumphantly than before, "I love you—I love you!"

She drew her head back a moment, and pushing the hair off his brow with her hand, every touch of which sent a fresh thrill through his frame, said, while the modest flush deepened in her face,

"What can you think of me?"

"You are an angel—an angel from heaven sent to rescue me from madness, and horror worse than death."

No man in George Barton's position could appreciate the fine shade of anguish that had penetrated Lady Blanche's tone when she put that question. He was too wrapped up in the bliss of feeling that she had owned herself his, in wonder at his triumph, to estimate the full extent of the sacrifice she had made in abandoning her woman's prerogative—the right to be sought for and not to seek. The avowal that had been wrung from her heart in an unguarded

moment appeared more natural and less unfeminine to him, glowing with the happiness of blessed assurance, than it would have done could he have fairly judged it apart from the joy of the discovery. Her quick intuition told her this.

"Yes," she said, burying her blushing face in his shoulder; "but, George, George, only think what I have done!"

"What you have done, my own Blanche—I may call you Blanche?—you are my own now, are you not?—only a noble soul like yours could have done! You have lifted a dark curtain which shut from my eyes the secrets of your heart. You have suddenly let in upon my soul all the light and warmth of your love."

"Ah! George," she said, raising her head and searching his eyes, "you do not yet understand what I have done. I must tell you all frankly, for this is an hour when there must be no secrets between us, and soul must speak to soul as if in the presence of a divinity who will make our future happy or miserable according to the truth and purity of our thoughts and feelings at this moment. George—I must tell you—when I came to that door with Charlie I had no idea of the real state of my heart toward you. We have spent many years of constant intercourse and friendship; we have met often, and exchanged our thoughts freely, but always under the restraint—with the conviction that—you know—the conditions of our two lives allowed of no closer ties; and so, as day succeeded day, there was no minute when my heart had consciously taken a longer step, or feelings had expanded from bud to blossom."

"Oh, Blanche!" cried George Barton, "you did not know my heart; the blossoms were blooming all over it, though they were covered by the veil which honor and loyalty to you and yours, and my own dignity—you understand me?—forced me to throw over them!"

"I know—I know; I do not say that I had not dimly guessed the secret you strove so manfully to hide. I will not say that now and then I did not feel the chords of my heart vibrate strangely in your presence and at your words; but I am inexperienced; I did not feel it to be all that I had conceived and dreamed of as love; I did not feel—as—as I do now!" and she hid her face again on his bosom. "One thing I felt: that there was no one like you among all I knew—that you had an intellectual power, and nobleness of soul, and purity and warmth of heart, and—yes, let me say it—take your hand off my mouth, sir!—and a brilliancy of talent—I should call it genius—which made you superior to most men I had met. I am not going to spoil you by saying more. But you see, George—and you must forgive me—I am one of those poor women who are born to a station—imprisoned in a close circle of conventionality—brought up to deliberate short sightedness—or, rather, hooded like the falcon, whose eyes are only set free by the master's hand when he has fixed upon the object at which they are to strike. My thoughts were not free; I was trained only to strike at the highest game; and what miserable *gibier* most of it is! And only fancy what a girl must feel who is brought up almost as a bird of prey."

"I don't know," said George, a little pang of jealousy flitting through his heart. "I don't know about the *gibier*, though. It is

not at all miserable. There is Tilbury." He was gently stroking her silken hair with his hand.

She threw her head back and glanced at him curiously.

"How strange!" she said. "His name was just upon my lips. George—I must tell you—it is a solemn secret known only to the countess and myself; and after what has happened to-day, it really makes me seem so frivolous and volatile and foolish and inconsequential that I hardly know how to avow it, or what you will think of me when you hear it. Well, you know, I really am very fond of my Cousin Tilbury—there, you needn't blush—there is a little kiss for you—on the forehead—I won't tell you why I gave you that!—but I never could feel that I really loved him. He was certainly the most attractive young fellow in the entire peerage, and I knew that the earl as well as my aunt were dying that I should marry him. And—and, George—I know now, since his illness—even since I saw you this morning—that he loved me deeply and truly—oh, so deeply and evidently that my heart really bled for him. George, I can hardly realize the emotions I have passed through during the last twenty-four hours. It all seems so wonderful, so fatal, so incredible!"

"Strange! But these are the things which try the temper of strong souls," said Barton, with the cool and somewhat feeble philosophy of triumphant love. "When I see and hear you speaking of them so calmly and yet with so much depth of feeling, Blanche, I see of how much finer temper your soul is than mine."

"No, no," said Lady Blanche. "Don't do yourself an injustice, or credit me with a force I do not possess. My emotions have been those of sentiment, which never go very deep, and yours of passion, which shake up the very foundations of one's being. I have had only one momentary, if terrible, glimpse of sorrow, while you have suffered its reality. My dear George, if you make such superficial and feeble remarks to me, I shall begin to think you do not set a very high estimate on my understanding."

He blushed and smiled.

"You evidently will not allow me to cherish the delusion long," he said. "Go on, dear Blanche."

"Well, George, there is something curious, inscrutable in all that has happened; some people would call it 'providential.' When poor Tilbury was carried home dying, apparently, and lingered on there, hovering between life and death, and I knew that his poor mother was distracted about him, a kind of loving pity took possession of my heart. I knew, I felt, he loved me, George; and when I thought of all the men I had met this season, and of all the dreary parterre of aristocratic flowers, some of them fresh, some of them *fanées*, and gone to seed, most of them ugly, from which I was expected to pick the one I would wear on my heart through life, an utter sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness settled down upon me, and I really felt as if I must turn to my Cousin Edward as the only possible and endurable companion of my life. And somehow my heart melted a little toward him when I knew he was so ill; and I became possessed with the idea that I ought to sacrifice myself, if it would help to rally him, not only for his own sake, but his mother's, and all concerned. You see, George, although I may have

caught little flashes and glimpses of a liking for me in your behavior now and then—"

"Oh!" groaned Mr. Barton.

"Still, you must admit that I had precious little—hardly more than a pin-point to build a romance upon—until last night, when I think you behaved very badly—with Colston looking on all the while—"

Barton seized the hand on which he had committed the trespass, and kissed it twice—three times, passionately.

"But, you see, that had not happened at the time I am speaking of, and I seemed to be doomed to just one choice, and there was a little—just a little—movement of my heart that way. So I went and told dear Aunt Dora all about it frankly, and offered to go and nurse him, and like the high-souled, good, honorable creature she is, she said she could not accept a sacrifice, she must have love—a devotion."

"Bless her!" murmured George, as he drew a deep breath of relief, for never had lover listened to a more disquieting narrative.

"George!" cried Lady Blanche, nervously, for her whole soul was in this confession, and her heart was throbbing with anxiety as she tried to read the effect of it in his face, for now it had become life and death to her that he should love her without a shade of doubt, without a solitary atom of reserve—"George! think of it: this was only yesterday—yesterday morning!—I could not say I loved him—and when I came, early this very morning, to think seriously over what I had done and what might have come of it, I thanked Heaven for my escape, for I could never, never be happy with any one unless I could give him my whole soul. And then, last evening, you came; and you looked at me so earnestly, and you looked, oh! so very sorrowful, and yet, I thought, so noble in your sorrow; and—and you let me see a little more of your heart than I had ever seen before, and somehow I could not get your face and figure out of my mind; but still I did not know what was the real state of my heart—until—until I saw you, there—you—generally so strong and calm and self-restrained—apparently quite shattered and wrecked by the tempest of your griefs; and then, George, oh! I can not tell you what went through my heart like a quick, sharp stab, and it seemed as if hot hidden springs gushed out toward you; and I knew that you were more precious to me than everything else—than my dignity, my womanly reserve—ay, even my life—and that—I loved you!"

Her head drooped upon his shoulder, and while tears of love and joy flowed from his eyes he pressed it against his heart.

"Oh, Blanche, Blanche, my love, my sweet, what can I ever give you in return for such a love as this—a love which has gone through the crucible and has come out pure gold? This is the sweetest story that ever fell from human lips on human ears. Blanche, my love, it is only now that I begin to realize what a sacrifice you have made for poor, unworthy me! Blind, stupid, selfish creature that I am! I was so wrapped up in my own bliss that I did not take in all the grandeur of your devotion—the divine magnanimity of your love. Blanche, I could go down and kiss your feet and worship you; for by your side I am only a poor, weak mortal, while you—"

"Stay, George!" she said, putting her fingers on his lips; "I want no more. I wanted only to feel that you understood me—that you had not mistaken me—that you had not lost a fragment of that respect and reverence for me which are essential to the permanence of affection—such as lie at the bottom of my love for you. Were a single chip struck off from those, I should feel that the sacrifice of my womanly modesty and reserve had been thrown away. You have said enough—quite too intensely—but in a way that carries conviction to my heart. I believe you. Oh, George, George! what is this feeling in my heart? I love you—I love you!"

Loud and shrill in George Barton's excited ear sung the birds, "I love you—I love you!"

At that moment Lord Charles tapped lightly on the door, and said,

"I say, may I come in?"

And entering, after a decent interval he went on:

"I have smoked three cigarettes, you know, and it's past six o'clock; and I didn't know how long this sort of thing might go on if you hadn't some fellow who hasn't quite lost his head to remind you that this is not Arcadia, but London, and that the earl dines at eight, and expects Mrs. Barton to dinner."

George started with a pained expression. This, indeed, was coming back from Arcady to London, with all its blackness.

"Yes," said Blanche, in reply to his inquiring look, "that is what we came here for."

"—Little thinking," interpolated Lord Charles, "what was in store for us. The carriage is below. We wanted to get you to come with us to your mother, and help us to persuade her to come and stay in Portman Square. The earl insists on it—will take no excuse. Blanche, who had never seen a barrister's chambers, would accompany me up here to surprise you—and, by Jove! I should say she has done it—and me, too! You know, George, my dear fellow, this is an awfully serious business. I've been turning it over in my mind while you two have been spooning, and I tell you my conviction is, it's all very well to spoon, but how are you going to get the earl to swallow the mess? Halloo! old fellow, I say—are you ill again?"

Lord Charles's gravity or solemnity never expressed itself in the form of his language, which was always of the rococo style: that is, florid, and rather wanting in dignity, but in the tone of his voice, which could become as lugubrious as that of an undertaker, and in the imperturbable gravity of his manner.

While Lord Charles had been speaking, George, at the mention of his mother, had put his hands to his head, and a visible anguish contracted his brow.

"Ah!" he groaned. "Blanche Layton, it is this which has nearly driven me mad. My poor mother—you will not recognize her! It is simply awful. She is a wreck; her hair is white as snow; her face is shrunken; and her eyes—oh! her eyes—" He shuddered and closed his own, as if to shut out an intolerable sight.

Lady Blanche and her brother exchanged glances. The young lord's face had suddenly become grave and gloomy. He nodded to her to speak.

"George," she said, "in deep, earnest tones, "if you really love me, as I believe you do, tell us what this all means! What is this dreadful business about your father? What is this about your poor mother? What is the horrible secret which is driving you—frantic? Tell me—tell Charlie and me, both of whom love you—"

"Both of whom love you," chimed in Lord Charles's manly voice.

"—What is this sorrow which seems to be weighing you down, and is making the earl look like a walking skeleton?"

The young lord silently approved this last expression, which struck him as graphic, by a nod of the head.

This appeal, although it seemed full of peril, was salutary, for the reason that it obliged George Barton to divert his thoughts from the agonizing subject of his mother, and to summon all his powers to the double task of meeting the anxious curiosity of Lady Blanche, whose ingenuous love, whose generous sacrifice, called for some corresponding frankness on his part, and of avoiding a disclosure of the earl's secret, to guard which had, by a shift of the weather-gage of passion, become once more a matter of paramount importance to him.

He opened his eyes and turned them on the fair questioner.

"Blanche," he said—then, looking shyly at Lord Charles—"you know you said I might call you 'Blanche' now."

A smile was her only answer, and the young lord almost imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders.

"Blanche, and my dear Lord Charles—"

"Humph!" said the latter grimly. "I think that under the circumstances, over which, by the way, I have no control, you may as well call me 'Charlie.'"

"Thank you, old fellow; long ago, when we were younger, I used to do so. Well, I must own to you that I think if you two had not come in when you did, and if you, dear Blanche, had not brought me angel's comfort, in the sweetness of that betrayal which I should never have had the courage to provoke, spite of the passionate love which possessed my soul, I should have become a raving madman." Lord Charles nodded. "Now, you think, very properly, that you have a right to some explanation of the ground of these extraordinary emotions—the cause of the pain and anguish which brought on that condition, in which I am ashamed and mortified to think you found me; ay!" he added, gravely, in response to a little pressure of Lady Blanche's hand, and a shy glance of her eye, "even though it has been the means of opening to me the golden gates of a Paradise at which I had so often gazed with longing eyes, but with the feeling that I was not worthy to enter it. Blanche, Charlie—you must believe me—you must, if you love and trust me, take it from me—that the secret I am carrying is not my own, and that the experiences of that terrible hour, known only to God and me, must never escape my lips—no, dearest Blanche, not even to you—for it was an hour of folly and madness."

"You see, my dear fellow," said Lord Charles, solemnly shaking his head, "the thing is this. Blanche and you and I are placed, by her astounding *coup de tonnerre*—which was just like one of the scenes in Hugo's novels, where the most outrageous thing that could

possibly happen turns up as a sort of every-day event—in a very serious position. There's no use concealing it—now is there, Blanche?—that you two have let yourselves in for a task to which the labors of Hercules, or the Channel tunnel, or the Panama canal, or anything of that kind, you know, is mere child's play. Forgive me, George, for being a little frank—I don't want to discourage you, or you, Blanche—I'll stick to you now the die is cast, but my belief is that, if the earl ever hears of this, we must all make up our minds to be hanged, drawn and quartered—he'll cut me off with a shilling to a dead certainty, and you will never get his consent if you wait till doomsday. Well, my dear George—candor for candor—I have a responsibility in regard to my sister. She is cleverer than I am, though she is younger; but I am a man, and I will never stand by and see her happiness compromised without making an effort to save her. And if I am to be an accessory before the fact and after the fact to this high-treason and conspiracy against the paternal Priam, I must at least be satisfied that my sister's affection is not fixed—in—in a direction, you know, in which my own judgment tells me it is wrong and dangerous to allow it to be fixed. You won't mind my saying it, George; you know what I mean? I haven't your facility and elegance of expression, you know, old fellow, and I can't beat about the bush with delicate euphuisms; but what I mean is, that—I—I think you ought to try and satisfy us that this awful fit of the blues, which we have witnessed with so much pain and regret, is due to some special and extraordinary cause, and—and isn't going to be the regular thing, you know."

Lord Charles delivered this, for him, unprecedentedly long speech with an earnestness of manner that inspired respect, while his tone was at once manly and affectionate. Some of the best qualities of the English nature appeared in the simple and straightforward candor, the delicacy of feeling, the deep affection for his sister and regard for his friend, and the common-sense which, even in an hour of emotion, would not be diverted from practical considerations. Lady Blanche had once or twice looked at him with appeal in her eyes, but he went bravely on. The quaintness of the form was due to the natural awkwardness of an Englishman in expressing deep and serious emotions, and it was perfectly innocent of any humorous intention, though it brought now and then, in spite of herself, a little malicious gleam into Lady Blanche's face. She could not help admiring her brother's manliness and sincerity, albeit, in her existing state of sensibility, she thought the moment was inopportune for raising such a delicate question, especially when the subject of anxiety had hardly yet recovered from a violent shock.

The young lord's words, however, could hardly have been better chosen had their object been to call back to fertile activity all the powers of George Barton's manhood. They had touched the right spring, and his spirit responded to the call. His system was one of no ordinary temper, full of health and vigor, and sound to the core with that soundness which is inherited from a stock of virtuous and temperate progenitors, and is inherent in a body and soul whose purity has been cherished as an inviolably precious element of their nature. Hence, although, in that awful crisis, the forces of a pow-

erful mind had been strained to their utmost tension, though it had prostrated him for a time to an extent which, for most men, would have demanded a long process of recovery, it only served in his case to test and prove the tempered elasticity of his being. When to this had been added the quickening action of that subtle and potent elixir, administered by Lady Blanche at the moment when his powers were failing him, it was no miracle that his nerves had, with wonderful rapidity, recovered their strength, and that he felt himself inspirited with a fresh renewal of energy.

He did not, however, respond immediately to Lord Charles's appeal, but making a sign, he rose from the sofa, and silently took a few turns in the room. Having ascertained that he could rely upon his physical strength, he excused himself, and retiring for a few minutes presently returned, the disorder of his dress and face arranged, his look clear and calm, his manner natural and composed.

Going up to Lady Blanche, he took both her hands, and gazed into her eyes.

"Blanche," he said, "you came to me just now as an angel and minister of grace! Now look into my eyes—the windows of my soul—and tell me whether you can catch a glimpse of any of those spirits of evil, those phantoms of darkness and madness, which you just now charmed away by the spell of your voice? They have fled—thank Heaven and you—they have gone forever! Look here, Blanche"—he put his arm around her and drew her to the window—"two things will never pass from my memory: one is the thrill of feeling I experienced when you pressed my poor crazed head against your heart; the other is the song of these two birds which at that same instant suddenly broke in upon my ears with a music of ecstasy and joy. Henceforth, when you are not by me, they will continue the enchantment; their voice will be your voice, and their song your song."

The two birds, glancing for a moment with their heads on one side, out of their bright, beaded eyes, as if startled by the approach of the young couple, while they seemed to listen to the familiar and musical voice of their master, suddenly stretched their yellow necks, opened their bills, swelling their downy throats, and warbled forth a melody, gay, bright, clear, triumphant.

"See,' he said, "Blanche, they are at home with you already. They are singing the pæan of love's victory, though they do not know how great and wonderful it is.

"Now, Charlie," he said, turning to the young lord, but still holding Blanche's hand in his own, "I am ready to answer you. I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of soberness and truth. Tell me, if you had seen your mother—whose love and charm you still remember—as I have to-day seen mine, if you had looked upon the wreck of that which had always been in your eyes the type of comeliness and perfection, the embodiment of all that was lovable and good, and you had known that the ruin which shocked you to the marrow of your bones had been wrought, not by any ordinary dispensation of fate or chance of life, but through the calculated and deliberate wickedness of villains whose identity you were certain of, but whose guilt it was not possible for you to prove

without bringing trouble and shame upon some you respected and loved, what would have been the condition of your mind? Do you think you could remain cool and collected? Do you believe you could keep your mind clear? Do you imagine you could reason with the calmness of a mathematician?"

Lord Charles shook his head.

"God forbid, Barton, that I should ever have to endure such an experience as you paint so vividly. I should take a hansom at once to Bedlam, and ask them to take me in."

Lady Blanche had listened eagerly as Barton spoke. Her curiosity was excited by the important admissions involved in his words. Whom did he suspect of his father's murder? Who were the persons whom he respected and loved, and on whom, he said, trouble and shame might come were the guilt of his father's murderers to be established? She made no remark, but her clear, active mind was engaged in the effort to form some hypothesis out of these enigmatic words.

"Well," continued George Barton, "that—superadded, remember, to my grief over my poor father's fate, for there is not the slightest doubt now that he has been foully murdered—was murdered in the Circus in that horrible manner—that is my experience. You can not, then, be surprised if I had an hour of agony and even madness. But as I hold this hand in mine, and as I hope to live and die in the happiness of your sister's love, I give you the solemn assurance that I do not believe it possible that such a fit of weakness can ever come again. In that brief hour I seem to have endured and outlived all possible sorrows, all possible agonies, all possible tortures of the soul; and now I am a new man, strong in the hope of having some day at my side the loving spirit that came and drew me out of the valley of the shadow of Death!"

He pressed her hand to his heart, and looked at Lord Charles with the glow of sincerity and confidence in his eyes.

"Barton," said the young lord, much moved, "I believe you—and I think your explanation—just like you—you're as eloquent as Liddon or Gladstone, but not quite so diffuse—accounts, to some extent, for the state in which we found you. But we must talk of that again. We must insist—eh, Blanche?—on your permitting us to share your anxieties. Many shoulders make a light burden, and even you aren't an Atlas. However, there's no time to discuss that now. And then we've got to consider what's to be done about you two. Egad! I'd sooner have cut my hand off that have allowed Blanche to come to the top of those stairs if I'd known what was in store for us! But—there, you see—it's just as old Mouncey always used to say, after he'd got awfully drunk and hit a proctor at Oxford, 'The devil was in it;' and so—I'm—I'm awfully glad, old fellow; I really don't think there's a better fellow living."

And the young lord grasped George's hand with some emotion, while Lady Blanche rewarded her brother with a kiss.

Lady Blanche, rapidly putting on her bonnet and gloves, turned to the young men and said,

"I think I had better go alone to Mrs. Barton, if you will intrust me with the mission, George? I may say that I have obtained your approval of her coming home with me, may I not?"

George Barton read a meaning in her eye which escaped Lord Charles, and assented. He could not at that moment have borne the excitement of an interview with his mother. At Lord Charles's suggestion, he and Barton were to dine in the city together, and arrive at Portman Square later in the evening.

"And one thing more," she said, before she went, as she gave him her hand, with a blush in her cheek; "something I had nearly forgotten. Aunt Dura charged me to tell you that Tilbury wants earnestly to see you; and she begs you will go to-morrow about twelve, and be sure not to let anything prevent you, for my poor cousin's state does not admit of crossing any of his fancies. Now, mind, she counts on you—and so do I!"

"Ah!" groaned Lord Charles; "then, you may depend upon it, he'll go."

As the young lord escorted his sister to the carriage, for he peremptorily refused to allow Barton to leave his chambers, he thought, and said to himself, that he had never seen her look more beautiful. A sudden ripeness seemed to have mellowed her charms; her face was grave, but glowing with the warmth of love; and in the intensified brightness and firmness of her glance he read not only a sweet, solemn happiness, but the ardor of a great resolve.

"Egad!" he murmured, as he returned upstairs, "if any one can manage it, she will—but it will require a miracle. The only chance I see for them is that the earl should get converted by Spurgeon or General Booth, and renounce the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, which might induce him to eat humble pie. Either that, or George's turning out to be the grandson of a marquis, with the wealth of a Monte Cristo. Ouida, now, could arrange it all to a marvel! But confound it all, as I said just now, nothing more improbable was ever conceived of in a novel than what has happened; and now that we are launched on a career of romance, the impossible may come to top the improbable and prove the old gibe that truth is stranger than fiction."

* * * * * * *

When, two minutes later, Lady Blanche entered the darkened parlor occupied by Mrs. Barton at the Salisbury Hotel, she was indeed shocked at the ruin wrought in her friend. Prepared by George's graphic description, and more graphic sorrow, for a great change, the reality exceeded all her anticipations. The poor widow, in deep mourning, lay on the sofa in a nerveless attitude, her hair, now quite white, coifed under a widow's cap, her pleasing, comely face, looking as if a withering blight had passed over it, and those fine brown eyes, which used to be so vivacious, become sunken and dim. She was so irrecognizable that for a moment Lady Blanche was almost going to excuse herself and retire, when the melancholy figure motioned to her to stay, and covering its face with a handkerchief, held out a hand that looked white and thin as that of a specter. The thoughts and sensations of the young beauty, after herself passing months in the brilliant gayeties of the season as an object of general admiration and envy, when brought suddenly face to face with this sad ruin of a fine woman were profoundly painful. For a moment she seemed glued to the floor. She had to summon all her forces to enable her to avoid a cry of astonishment, and to

meet the shock of her first meeting with the shattered and broken-hearted woman, now become to her an object of affectionate solicitude. She, however, quickly regained her self-command, and stepping to the side of the couch, seized and kissed the hand extended to her. With an effort Mrs. Barton raised her head and tried to speak, but the words died on her lips. Seeing her droop, Lady Blanche threw her arm round her neck, pillowing the sorrowful, anguished brain, and the whitened locks and faded cheek of the mother upon her bosom, where only a little before the suffering head of the son had rested. The two women wept a while in silence, the elder clinging to the younger with desperate energy, as if some instinct told her that there, in the strong, young heart, of which she could hear and feel the throbbing, there was something of hope and repair for the tottering ruins of her own existence.

And Blanche's first word, chosen with exquisite tact, sent a strange thrill through the languid heart of the widow.

"Mother!"

The tone was so tender, sweet, and full of meaning that Mrs. Barton startled, wondering, raised her head, and brushing the tears from her eyes, gazed eagerly into the face of the young girl. The intuition of maternal love had caught something in the word which the mother's glance, quickening into light and clearness, sought to verify.

Blanche, controlling her heart, which indeed was bursting with grief, smiled through her tears a divine smile of love and sympathy, and answered the questioning look in a voice that sounded in the ears of the widow like heavenly music.

"Yes," she said, "I see you understand me. I have seen him! I have just come from him; and—dear Mrs. Barton—dear mother, I am his and yours forever!"

This time it was Blanche who was clasped with nervous joy to the mother's heart, beating with the energy of a new life, and for a while it seemed to those two women as if heaven had come upon earth, and sorrow and crying were done away.

CHAPTER XVII.

DRAWING THE STING.

ALTHOUGH Charles Pollard, in order to rouse his uncle from the apathy of despair, made that suggestion about the advisability of levanting at once in the yacht which his foresight had provided, he was as yet by no means disposed to throw up the game.

The yacht, by the way, had fallen into his hands most opportunely for his purpose, through the failure of a Russian prince to pay up the balance of her cost to the builders, who sold her for less than half the value to Captain Yates. Her name was the "Vera," of two hundred tons. She was Clyde built, with beautiful lines, and her internal arrangements were luxurious and handsome. If it had been possible to run away from memory as well as from justice, no more enchanting prospect could have been offered to the partners than a dash across the Atlantic in this superb and

comfortable craft. But, unhappily, neither of the intending passengers was in a humor to appreciate the æsthetic aspects of such a voyage.

Charles Pollard, in the course of that secret life of pleasure which he had led, had become used to finding himself in positions where exposure would have ruined his character as a sober and trustworthy man of business. Hence he was cooler than his uncle in this crisis of their affairs, since he believed the earl to be at their mercy, notwithstanding what had occurred, and the only two people who knew anything of the connection of the Pollards with the crime were Yates and Schultz, the latter of whom was out of the country; so that the nephew was for putting a bold face on things and running the risk of discovery. He hankered after London and its gay life; he shrunk from admitting his guilt, as he would do by flight —from being hunted through the civilized world by Justice with her long telegraphic tentacles and her confounded arrangements for extradition of criminals. Besides, demoralized as he was he still had an affection for his wife, the daughter of a brewer who was in Parliament, and his two children, whom he would be obliged to leave behind him, fresh victims of the crime which had poured out its streams of blood and sorrow in so many directions. After, therefore, he had stirred up his uncle by discussing the ways and means of making good their escape to South America, he turned again to the subject of their position, and endeavored to convince his senior that whatever suspicions Mr. Sontag might entertain, it was quite impossible for him to lay hands on any evidence of their criminality.

But Joseph Pollard's intellect was now quickened by peril, and not a single point of danger escaped his keen and practiced judgment. He said,

"You forget, Charlie, that young Barton probably knows of the forgery of those transfers. I reminded you of that before. No doubt he knows as well of the deficiency in the rent account, so that it will be impossible for us to explain the restitution we made last week, and which, I fear, will turn out to have been a useless waste of resources. The evidence as to both these facts can not be suppressed. With two such charges against us they may try to fix us with the capital crime; and how do you know that all the agents Yates has employed will be trustworthy? In any case, I won't risk being tried for forgery and embezzlement. Then, again, the earl can fix us for all that money."

"He will never do that. We have only to threaten to tell the countess everything. He shrinks from that as he would from death."

"Possibly; but he may even risk her knowing all in order to get his money back or punish us. He has a masterly, overbearing spirit, and is a perfect devil when he's crossed. I judge from this letter that Sontag has seen through your clever trick of reproducing the papers, and doesn't believe they were lost. That sets him at guessing what object we had in the maneuver, the advertisement and all that. Every card we play seems to be trumped as soon as it is on the table. If he suspects us of one thing he will soon begin

to suspect us of another; and remember this, we don't know how much they know."

"Nor how little."

But Charles Pollard strove in vain to shake the elder partner's mind on these points, in which he was so accurate and so unanswerable.

In the middle of their discussion a knock came at the door, and a clerk handed in a letter. Charles Pollard, after a glance at the superscription, tore open the envelope.

"Well," he said, "if you are determined to go, this is lucky. My friend, you know, the captain—"

"D—n him," said Mr. Joseph, with a shudder.

"Is now waiting for me. He says he has something important to communicate. I promised to give him the balance of that money to-night. I will go and tell him to order everything to be ready for a start. The rendezvous is the Three Tuns, at Gravesend, close by the water, where I will have the captain of the yacht waiting to take us off. Yates was to have met me there this evening anyway."

He caught up his hat to go to Clement's Inn.

"Stay!" said the uncle, whose faculties were now all alive. "Where are you going to meet him?"

"At Clement's Inn."

"Have you ever met him there before?"

"Never. But he says in his note it is a safe place—the rooms of a friend. You see it is a very unsuspicious address." Had Mr. Charles known what was the fact, that in the chambers referred to Mr. or "Dr." Schultz had been concealed during his latest weeks in London his statement would have been confirmed, though not in the sense in which he made it.

"No doubt. Nevertheless, Charlie, don't you go. After that letter of Sontag's, and the visit of that dreadful man, I should not be the least surprised if our movements were being watched. Just look here, Charlie; I haven't spoken of it before." He turned his chair round toward the window and put up his glasses. The room was in the front of the mansion, one of those noble chambers which were designed by Adam, or some other architect of the Georgian era, with windows down to the floor. "There," he said to his nephew, "you have sharp eyes. Keep behind the curtain and just look out and see if there isn't a short, seedy-looking fellow with a soft, black felt wide-awake on, slouching about anywhere."

"Yes," said Charles Pollard, turning toward his uncle with a face which had paled considerably. "He is some distance down, leaning against the railings of the garden."

"I thought so. I nearly ran against him when I went out this morning to Westminster. When I came back I happened to look out of window, and saw him standing opposite. It seemed odd, but I should not have thought any more about it except for that fellow's visit and his insolent manner. We are being watched—at all events, in our situation we must act as if we were. Write a note to your man to tell him to meet us at Gravesend, and to telegraph orders to the yacht to be ready to sail at midnight."

"You are right, Uncle Joseph," said Charles Pollard, as he went to his room to prepare the letter for Captain Yates. His manner

was sober and crestfallen. The sensation of being watched as a criminal by detectives can hardly fail to depress the most buoyant nature, especially when there is a guilty conscience within it. A man must feel the jail-door yawning and not far off when the man-catchers are after him.

The boy who had come with the note had been directed to wait for an answer; and Charles Pollard, now suspicious of every one, sent for him to his room, and after a look at his face, which told him he had before him a gallows-bird, dressed as a lawyer's boy, cautioned him to get away as quickly as possible, and keep the note out of sight.

The young hopeful whispered to himself something like "Granny," as his dark, wicked eyes leered at Mr. Charles in a knowing way. Enforcing his caution with half a sovereign, which the youth with a wink slipped into his sock, he dismissed him, and returned to his uncle's room just as Grayson, whose face was very red, and who spoke thickly and hurriedly, announced the Earl of Selby. The two partners only had time to exchange a glance before the peer walked into the room.

Never did that consummate man of the world deploy with greater brilliancy the resources of his wit and experience than in this daring raid into the enemies' camp. With the most exquisite ease he advanced to the two solicitors, and saluted them with that mixture of urbanity and condescension against which it is impossible for men not born to the manner to struggle; while they read in the cold glitter of his gray eye, and the sardonic smile lurking in the corners of his mouth, a triumphant sense of strength which was calculated in itself to chill and depress their spirits. There was a certain stiffness in their response to his somewhat patronizing affability which proved the inferiority of their diplomatic capacity. In his present humor it would have required a gentleman of the highest culture, and one of infinite resource and *finesse*, to match the peer.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said; "I am lucky in finding you both together—and I hope disengaged—as I have something important to say to you."

He took the easiest chair he could find, and laid his hat and stick on an adjacent table.

"Your lordship is none too soon," said Mr. Joseph Pollard, bluntly, "to explain to us, as we had a right to expect you would, the serious step you have taken without consulting us, and, I must add, in direct violation of the common understanding between solicitor and client."

"Since I had the pleasure of seeing you yesterday," replied the earl, with a charming assumption of *naïveté*, "I have taken several important steps, Mr. Pollard, on which I did not consider it necessary to consult you. Which of them is it that has come to your knowledge?"

"The particular one to which I allude," said Mr. Pollard, senior, "is one which has procured us the honor of this communication from the chief of the Detective Department—such a communication as has never, during the long history of this house, been addressed to it." He held out the letter toward the earl, who was within arm's reach, but who did not appear to notice it.

"I trust it is in no way disagreeable," said the earl.

"Your lordship can judge for yourself," persisted Mr. Pollard, still holding out the paper, and getting very red in the face.

"No," replied the earl, putting up his hand to wave back the document. "I was not aware that any letter would be addressed to you, but no doubt the Department understands its business. I suppose—and I should have expected it—they wish you to give them some information in regard to Mr. Barton's latest interviews with you. You are not astonished at that? I assume they have informed you that my nephew has come to himself, and that his statement renders it impossible to doubt any longer that poor dear Barton, whom you and I were maligning for running away, was the victim of that murder in the Regent Circus?"

The earl spoke very calmly, with his eye fixed on Mr. Joseph Pollard; and when he ceased speaking he turned his glance on the younger partner, as if he would at once have penetrated and fascinated them both.

The fact that Lord Tilbury had recovered his senses and given this important information was a fresh shock to the nerves of the partners.

"Mr. Sontag tells us generally that Barton was murdered," said Mr. Joseph, sulkily, "but not that the Earl of Tilbury had made any such statement."

"That, and other information, establishes the fact. In these circumstances I instructed the police to offer in my name a large reward for the discovery of the perpetrators of that most horrible crime, and one of my objects in coming here was to direct you to withdraw that advertisement, which you know I never authorized, and to render the police all the assistance in your power in bringing the murderers to justice."

There was not a flush of excitement in his cheek, not a trace of it in his voice, as he uttered these words.

"My lord, we had withdrawn the advertisement and the charges against Mr. Barton—I expect before you had taken any action," said Mr. Charles, with a malicious smile on his face.

"Indeed?" said the earl, carelessly.

"Yes, my lord, for a very good reason. We had found the papers." He glanced sidewise at the peer.

The earl started.

"Found the papers! Where are they?"

"Here, my lord, in our possession. They had been mislaid; they were found this morning in this very room. We have them safe enough."

The earl noticed, without seeming to do so, the malice of Mr. Pollard's smile.

"I am very glad to hear it," replied the earl; and glancing round the room, "I suppose," he said, "they are in that large bag—but no—it is impossible that such a bulk of documents as that could have been overlooked."

Mr. Charles Pollard bit his lip, and his partner's eyes fell, but the elder replied,

"They are locked up in a safe place, my lord."

"I am delighted," cried the earl; and though the tone was a

little exaggerated, there was no doubt his heart went with it. "May I ask if that mortgage is ready for signature? I should like to have the matter settled at once. I can execute it now."

"It—it—is not ready, my lord; and after the manner in which you have acted, which appears to be quite inconsistent with any further friendly relations between your lordship and ourselves, you will hardly be surprised if we feel ourselves bound to decline to render you any further assistance in these matters. Acting for the Countess of Tilbury, we must request you at once to make up the sums advanced you on her behalf, and to clear her interest at Linton from the charge that lies upon it. We know the request is premature, and perhaps inconvenient, but we are obliged to act in the interest of our client."

In delivering this speech the elder Pollard assumed his loudest and most insolent tone, into which he endeavored to introduce a note of fine sarcasm and signally failed.

The earl smiled.

"Oh!" he said, quietly. "You have forestalled my own wishes and intentions, Mr. Pollard, in the most gratifying manner; and expecting—and even hoping—that you might make such an intimation to me, I have—also without consulting you—taken steps to provide against this contingency."

The two partners stared blankly at the smiling, imperturbable figure before them, for they had fully expected to see him at their feet. Mr. Joseph Pollard retorted,

"All the better, my lord, for we intend to lay the whole matter before the countess to-night." He was playing their last card.

"Nay, gentlemen, I am sure you will not do that," said the peer, smiling, with the most provoking coolness.

"We shall most certainly!" said Mr. Joseph Pollard, with a stubborn and brutal emphasis.

"Before you contradict me so rudely," said the earl, with a cold, stern inflection of voice, and a look that made the senior partner quail, "you will allow me to set forth the reasons of my confidence. In the first place," he said, taking a letter from his pocket and throwing it carelessly on the table, on which Mr. Pollard's arm was resting, "there is a letter from Mr. Hackluyt—"

"Mr. Hackluyt!" cried the two partners together, with visible uneasiness.

"Stating," continued the earl, without taking any notice of the interruption, "that he is prepared and intends to-morrow on my behalf to take up my obligations and pay off the charges at the Caledonian Bank, thus releasing my sister's mortgage, which will then become void and of no effect."

"The original is in our hands, however!" said Mr. Pollard, with a sinister smile.

"He also states that he will hand you £55,000 of United States bonds in substitution of those alleged to have been lost; but as you admit you have found them, that will, happily, be unnecessary, and I now believe in any case would be unsafe. His solicitors, Knox, Masterman & Bullen, who within the past hour have become mine, will prepare a fresh mortgage of my Kensington property for a large amount, and to-morrow will present you an order to hand

over to them all papers and documents of mine which are lying in your possession, and will pay you a sum which will more than cover any claims you can possibly have against me."

The astonishment and chagrin of the partners became more and more evident as each sentence fell from the earl's lips in clear, firm tones, sharpened by a fine sarcastic emphasis, which he knew so well how to impart to them. It appeared that they were even to be denied the pleasure of a revenge.

The natural brutality which lay at the bottom of Mr. Joseph Pollard's nature got the better or the worse of him as he became conscious how cleverly the peer had outgeneraled them by his strategic march in the rear.

He tried on a little rough sarcasm of his own, but it was of the kind which is a part of the vulgar repertory of Billingsgate.

"They won't get them," he said; "there are a good many accounts to settle before you get those papers. So, my lord, you have been to Mr. Hackluyt, to whom we introduced you, behind our backs? We should never have expected that of a nobleman, or any one else pretending to be a gentleman. We were under the impression that we were dealing with a man of honor, or we should have taken care to protect ourselves."

If a flush passed swiftly over the peer's cheek, he showed no other sign of anger. His lips were still curved in a smile, but, had the two men taken the pains to mark it, they would have found it a very terrible one.

"Fortunately, sir," he said, coolly, "I had ceased to be under any such impression in regard to either of you, and I have acted accordingly; and I can hardly consent to accept your judgment upon any question of honor. I naturally took steps to protect myself against two knaves who were trying to ruin me."

Both the men were furious, and seemed about to speak together, but the earl held up his hand with an imperious gesture, and his eyes flashed fire.

"Silence!" he cried; "do you dare to defend yourselves? I will show you that I do not speak lightly, or condescend to mere vulgar irritation. I speak seriously. Will either of you venture to deny that I am addressing two men—solicitors of the High Court of Justice—who have been guilty of embezzling a vast sum of money from an estate intrusted to their hands—who conspired together to swindle me in order to cover up their own frauds, and who forged my name to transfers of shares? I know it all—I know it all—and I have proof enough to justify immediate action. Nay, more, I have now a clear insight into your devilish scheme. You could easily have raised me that money if you had chosen, so Mr. Hackluyt assures me, at the very time when you pretended it was not to be found on any terms. I understand now—unhappily, too late—what your object was. You concocted that arrangement with my sister in order to involve me so deeply in your crimes that my mouth might be shut, my eyes closed, my hands tied to your own long-continued frauds and robberies; and then, I believe in my heart, even yesterday you would have made me the accomplice of some other iniquity yet to be disclosed. Happily, your machinations

have failed, and it is not you, but I, who hold the key of the position; attempt to seize it if you dare!"

The peer's eyes, now cold and stern, fixed the two solicitors, whose pale faces had lengthened, while they stared at him blank and silent, their under-jaws dropped, their breath painfully coming and going.

The earl paused a moment. Neither of them tried to speak. The blow had crushed them, and vile as they were, their pride would not let them throw themselves at his feet and plead for mercy.

"Now, Mr. Pollard," said the peer, addressing the elder, "do you repeat your threat of sending information to the countess to-night? Unless you give me your word that you will keep silent on that matter, and hand over those papers without any further trouble, I will send for a policeman and give you into custody immediately."

Both the men shrunk before the earl's eyes, and a cold shiver seemed to pass through them at these words. They knew the peer to be quite capable of executing his threat; and the very idea of being within the iron grip of the law, on whatever charge, completely frightened and subdued them, with that horrible sense of guiltiness which was locked up in their breasts. Adieu the "Vera" and all chance of escape, if the earl were not appeased!

"I don't know what your lordship means by using such language to us," said Joseph Pollard, with a cowed, sullen air, very different from that he had been affecting. "But we have no desire to part with your lordship on any but amicable terms. Of course, if you don't wish it, nothing shall be intimated to the countess, and we will carry out your lordship's instructions as to your papers to-morrow."

The peer saw that it went sorely against the flesh for the elder partner to say this and the younger to assent to it; but his glance did not for one moment relax its sternness, while a smile of contempt was on his lips.

"It is at least as well," he said, rising, "that we should understand each other. You have grossly deceived me, and villainously wronged me. You have been the means of drawing me into a false and ignoble position. If you thought that that would give you a control over me you were egregiously mistaken. For my part, however, enormous as have been my losses by you, I should be content to endure in silence the injuries I have justly sustained through my complicity with you, unless you drove me to take action in self-defense, or unless I found myself obliged in justice to others to bring home to you the consequences of some greater crime. I wish you good-day."

He turned on his heel.

Neither of the partners moved. They were crushed by his last words, by his manner, by his audacious superiority, by their own weakness. Mr. Charles Pollard no longer accompanied him to the stairs chatting and smiling. The proud earl opened the door for himself, and, without casting a glance behind him, nodding, however, kindly to Mr. Grayson, who really was in a very unfit state to appreciate the compliment, he seemed to shake the dust off his feet as he went from the threshold which he would never cross again. There was a light of triumph in his eye. Mr. Hackluyt had met

him with a readiness far beyond his expectations, and had even volunteered to forestall the arrangements he proposed. Thus, though at an immense sacrifice, he had relieved himself of a great load.

Still, the expiation of his sin was not complete, and the sword of Damocles quivered menacingly above his head.

No sooner had the earl turned his back than Mr. Grayson, whose state of unwonted excitement had been observed by his younger fellow-clerks with astonishment and some raillery, entered the room where his principals remained in a condition of impotent rage, closed the door behind him, and, drawing a dirty handkerchief from his pocket, began to blubber.

"What on earth does this mean, Mr. Grayson?" cried Mr. Charles Pollard, angrily, turning upon the unhappy clerk the pent-up stream of his fury. "What the devil is the matter with you—eh? Why don't you speak?"

"Oh-h-h! Mr. Charles!" sobbed the old clerk out of the depths of his handkerchief.

"Why, you're drunk, sir!" said the elder. "Get out of the room directly, and never let me see your face again."

Instead of obeying this command, Grayson removed the damp linen, and disclosed the very feature which had become the object of Mr. Pollard's just antipathy, red, swollen, running with tears, while his lips, writhing in the vain effort to articulate, exhibited the few remaining teeth which garnished his gums in a ghastly manner. He caught at the back of a chair to keep himself from swinging round and round. Then, pulling himself up, he managed to ejaculate, in a voice that ended in a sort of feeble, broken crow,

"Doo-n't turn me out, sir!—most important in—information. Mr. G—Garbett's—shcoundrel, gen—gen'lemen!"

Joseph Pollard looked at him sharply for an instant, and, nodding to his partner, said,

"Sit down, Mr. Grayson—sit down. You seem ill. Pull your wits together, man, and tell us what you've got to say quickly."

"Mis-ser Joseph," cried Grayson, with a fresh explosion of grief, "Mis-ser Charles—sir—'fraid, sir—I—I've betrayed you!"

Now both the partners started, and eagerly looked at the miserable object before them.

"I—I didn't mean to do it—sir—ge—gen'lemen!—oldest clerk in the esh—es—esh—shtablishment—I 'sure you—did—didn't mean to let out any she—shecretsh—b—b—but Garbett'sh—a detective—Shot—Shot—Shcotland Yard—asked me—help to—dish—dishcover where Barton had gone to wish—shose—shose papers—shtrict confidensh—Mis-ser Pollard—said—said it wash—on your account. Told him, sir—Mis-ser Pollard—old confidenshul clerk—wouldn't—wouldn't dishclose any shecrets of our firm, sir. But—G—Garbettsh—shly—fellow—ashked—me quest—questions, an' I—I told him, papersh—washn't—couldn't have been mishlaid—your room Mis-ser Joseph. Went to lunsh with him—sir—and—and—very shly fellow—b'lieve he's trying to make you 'sponsible—murder—mu-u-rder, sir!"

"What?" shouted Mr. Joseph Pollard, who had listened with impatience to Mr. Grayson's sentences, broken, even more than we

have indicated, by hiccoughs and sobs. "What do you say, Grayson? Did he tell you that?"

"No—no!" said Grayson shaking his head from side to side, and, having once set it going, like that of a crockery mandarin, finding the greatest difficulty in the world in stopping it again. "He did—din't say sho—shay so—but—I—see what he's driving at—and oh! gen'lemen—Mr. Joseph—Mr. Charles—I'm very sorry—gave him a losh—a l-lot of in-information—'fraid I've done wrong—"

"You infernal fool!" said Mr. Charles Pollard; "you deserve to have your head knocked off with a poker;" and, that being the only visible weapon at hand, Mr. Charles looked as if he really were tempted to pick it up and use it. "Tell us what you've told him."

"Stay, Charlie," whispered the elder Pollard, "remember this is a matter of life and death for us. Let me manage him." And, going across the room to old Grayson, who was beginning to be sobered a little by excitement and the awakening of his conscience to the breach of duty he had committed, he gradually extracted from him the whole story of Mr. Garbett's maneuvers and of the information Mr. Grayson had imparted. It appeared that, before the powerful stimulant he had taken had begun to operate, Mr. Grayson's suspicions had been awakened by one or two questions that Mr. Garbett, in the keen ardor of his blood-hound chase, had put to him, for Grayson was by no means deficient in a certain lawyer-like sharpness; and when he returned to the office, and the fiery sherry began to develop its strength, his brain, in its superheated state, suddenly conceived the idea that Mr. Garbett was trying to fix a crime on the solicitors, whom he, Grayson, had served for over thirty years—father and son—and so he had decided to make a clean breast of it. There was certainly something phenomenal in the fact that Mr. Garbett's (as he thought, guarded) questions should have suggested such an idea to Grayson drunk which probably would not have occurred to Grayson sober, and there really had been very little said on which to build his suspicions; but there was quite enough to alarm men already on the *qui vive*, who, moreover, were beginning to feel that depressing sensation that the Fates are hunting them, which enfeebles all the forces, and especially paralyzes hope. They speedily turned poor Grayson out of the room, sending him home in a cab to prevent suspicion, with a mild reproof, and began rapidly to make their preparations for evading the net which their fears and the incidents of the day only too clearly showed was being drawn around them.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE AND THE TRIUMPH OF DUTY.

WHEN Lady Blanche and Mrs. Barton reached the mansion in Portman Square eight o'clock had just struck, but the earl had ordered dinner to be delayed for half an hour. He was feverish and disquieted at their non-appearance. The day had been for him, like the day before, one of trying emotions. He had succeeded beyond

his expectations in that struggle to keep his honor, outwardly at least, unimpaired. The Pollards lay vanquished and bound at his feet. Before to-morrow night he would be able to say that he had repaired his fault so far as the countess was concerned, and that he had proved his repentance by a great sacrifice, for he meant to bear the loss himself, and leave the two villains to their own consciences. Nevertheless, he was too sagacious to indulge in the lightness of victory. To-night his heart was full of the expiation due to other victims of his faults. In asking Mrs. Barton to his house, he had thought of that. This was the first significant act of that expiation; and the delay in the return of his daughter, envoy extraordinary of the mission, to which his mind, in its intensified sensibility, attached supreme importance, troubled him. In vain he endeavored to calm his excitement by walking up and down the boudoir where he was awaiting their arrival, or by casting his eyes over a pile of evening journals and French newspapers which lay on a Florentine table beside his easy-chair. He could not be happy until he had taken Mrs. Barton's hands in his, and testified to her, by his voice and manner, that he was grieved and repentant, if, for however short a time, he had allowed himself to question her husband's integrity. But even then would he have drunk the whole of the bitter cup of repentance?

The cordial which Lady Blanche had administered to the poor broken-hearted lady had exercised a wonderfully inspiriting effect upon the patient. If she had lost a husband, she had gained a daughter, and such a daughter! Humanity must be at its last gasp when all things become equally indifferent; when the soul can wake up to no provocation of love or ambition or pride or hope; when the heart actually cherishes the void created by the loss of some precious object, and will not permit one inch of that vacuum to be filled by any substituted comfort. But here, in the midnight of an utterly hopeless sorrow, the sky suddenly filled with a luminous brightness, and she learned that the most secret, and therefore most daring of her ambitions, was fulfilled. Lady Blanche, the proudest and noblest beauty in the galaxy of English life, loved the son who was the pride and very apple of his mother's eye. She did not think of obstacles. She knew Lady Blanche's high, dominating spirit her incalculable force of character, and she felt that whatever Blanche willed must and would be done. And indeed the young lady took the elder woman in hand and guided her like a child. She told her that, terrible as was the blow that had struck her down, the noble spirit still had duties to perform, hopes to cherish, a future that must be bravely met; that strength came by testing, and that only craven souls succumbed to trial. She delicately used the painful and dangerous effects of their common grief upon the son's mind to quicken the mother's drooping energies, and rouse her to the woman's duty of sooth and comfort. Thus, by exciting all the best feelings of her friend's nature, she managed to revive, gently and feebly at first, but by and by, from the contact of her own vigorous enthusiasm with intensifying effect, the benumbed fibers of the frozen spirit. One of the marvels of our mysterious humanity is the subtle influence on the body of elements so impalpable, so spiritual, as thought and sentiment. The prostrate system, which no apothe-

cary's medicine can affect, will be revived and healed by a word, an idea, a note of music, the voice of the presence of love.

To Mrs. Barton as to her son the gentle ministry of Lady Blanche had brought a spiritual elixir. Her eye had brightened, and her face had put on a more calm, resigned, and forceful-looking dignity of sorrow. Strength was beginning to come back at the touch of hope.

So that by the time she reached Portman Square, Lady Blanche, who had her own plan of action sketched out in her mind, and was bent on executing it after her own conceit, had succeeded in persuading the widow that she was strong enough to support the meeting with the earl and the fatigue of a quiet dinner, although at first she had begged to be allowed to spend the evening alone in her room. The young lady's programme, however, was arbitrary, and was based not only on a consideration of the salutary effect of rousing Mrs. Barton from her torpor; she wished to strike, and strike forcibly, some chords in the heart of the earl. For her quick, active mind had been reflecting upon certain words which had escaped the lips of George Barton, and her feminine intuition had already gone a long way further ahead of the facts with which she was acquainted than was consistent with the *principia* of Baconian induction. This young but cunning diplomatist remembered that as yet her father had no knowledge of the devastation wrought on Mrs. Barton's face and figure by the shock she had sustained. The fatal telegram from Pollard & Pollard, which the widow had shown to her, aroused her indignation, and brought a flush of shame to her cheek.

She could not believe that her father had had anything to do with that cruel action—one so utterly out of harmony with the old-fashioned chivalry of his conduct, especially toward women. She guessed that he had not even heard of it. If so, why, she asked herself, with an astute suspicion, should Pollard & Pollard have sent such a heartless message without her father's sanction? Why was it that the earl had at first accepted the solicitors' theory, credited a dishonorable libel on the elder Barton, forbidden any communication with his son; and now repudiated the suspicion, took George Barton into close confidence, and offered Mrs. Barton an act of hospitality which Lady Blanche, who had remarked the anxiety he felt about it, shrewdly attributed to its true motive—reparation? Therefore this young lady, with a diplomatic indifference which one cannot too strongly condemn, as to the feelings of the parental subject of her political action, had designed a surprise for the earl, in which she hoped herself to surprise some precious indications of those secrets which he and George Barton—poor masculine mortals!—fondly imagined they could keep concealed from a woman's wit, and that woman Lady Blanche Layton! And as for poor Mrs. Barton, she was a pawn, or a queen, or anything you like that is simply stationed about at another's will in this cunning game.

In accordance with her plan, Lady Blanche did not go to her father on entering the house, but sending him a message that dinner would be served at half past eight, and that Mrs. Barton would be there, she hurried the good lady to the room which had been assigned to her, next to Blanche's own, and assisted her with her own hands to arrange her dress and hair, which the young girl began to

think looked very beautiful in its silvery whiteness over the soft, amber tint of the sorrowful face. Then, choosing for herself a simple white dress, high in the neck, and without any other ornament than a string and cross of pearls which her mother had been accustomed to wear on only one day in the year—the *jour des morts*—Lady Blanche took the widow's arm and led her to the boudoir where the earl was waiting. Though it was still daylight without, the room was lit by a Dresden lamp, the radiance of which was subdued by a gorgeous Japanese shade, so that when the earl rose and came forward, raising his eyes from a book on which they had been fixed for some time under the light, although he was not reading, he did not, for a moment, distinguish anything beyond a dark figure in mourning, and the whiteness of a widow's cap. But when he took the lady's hand in both his own, and was just about to open his lips with some kind sentiment which he knew so well how to put into a refined and delicate form, his keen gray eye lighted up with startled surprise, a nervous thrill went through his frame, and for just a second or two he evidently struggled for utterance.

"Mrs. Barton! is it possible?" he gasped out.

There was quite an agony in his tone, but he stopped short. The words had been wrung from him by surprise, and his chivalrous tact promptly told him how painful they must be. He glanced for an instant reproachfully at Lady Blanche, as if to say, "Why did you not warn me?" but she did not blench in the least. Holding on still to Mrs. Barton's arm, she gave it a little pressure of encouragement, for she had done her best to string up the widow's nerves to the proper key for this meeting. In such circumstances women are readier, and often even stronger, than men. Emotion is their element; their fiber is finer; it responds much more quickly than the masculine fiber to the touch of thought and feeling; and hence they can express themselves with greater, sometimes even with too fatal, facility. Therefore at this moment Mrs. Barton had the advantage of the earl. There was no surprise at his surprise; that she had anticipated. Her moral position was stronger because he had, in permitting a slur to be cast on her husband's memory, done her an injury—whether unwittingly or not did not matter—his invitation was a kind of tacit admission that he felt himself in the wrong. Now her turn had come to be generous. She said sweetly, while she brought up her other hand on the earl's, which felt icy to the touch and gave his a pressure which clearly meant a warm forgiveness,

"You scarcely recognize me, earl? I am so changed! Sorrow has indeed dealt hardly with my poor body!"

"Hardly!" he replied, echoing the word. "My dear Mrs. Barton, can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you, earl? What have you done, except to allow your faith for a little while to be disturbed by appearances? That—I have already forgiven."

"What have I done? Ah! you little know—" he cried, in a hollow voice, and then Blanche, keenly watching him from under her long lashes, saw that he checked something he was going to say in his usual lightning-like fashion, as, changing his tone, he continued —"how deeply, in my blindness and stupidity, I have wronged your husband's memory!"

"Oh!" said Lady Blanche to herself, "that is not what he was going to say." She felt for the fatal telegram which was in her pocket, and was tempted to draw it out and ask him to deny any responsibility for it, but readvising herself, she determined to hold it over for a later moment.

"I can not judge you harshly, earl; you must have had grounds for your conduct. It was those who misled you who were really to blame."

He shook his head. He could not trust himself to speak, for he was perfectly alive to the danger, in this moment of trouble and surprise, of uttering something that might compromise him. The widow's words were stabs, and sharp ones. What grounds had he had? None, except the suggestions of two base scoundrels to whom he had listened only too readily, because his judgment and generosity and candor had all been warped by a sense of his own unhappy error. And what was contracting his heart and creating that strange pallor in his face which made Lady Blanche just then regret that she had ventured, with her inexperience, to play with those edged tools of passion, which only a few master-hands are strong enough, or cunning enough, to wield? What was deepening the wrinkles on his brow and causing such a strange light in his eyes? It was the feeling that these terrible ravages of grief added a frightful weight to the already intolerable burden of the consequences directly following from his first wrong act. But for that, would Barton be now an impalpable corpse, and his wife a shocking wreck? Yet the young lady, while her mind was puzzling over her suspicions, could not help admiring the dexterous delicacy of her father's answer.

"You must not be too good to me," he said, gently, as he took Mrs. Barton's hand and placed it on his arm to lead her to the dining-room. "Permit me to taste some of the bitterness of regret, if only as a salutary remedy for my unpardonable blunder."

In the presence of the servants it was, happily, impossible to pursue the painful subjects which were so actively occupying their minds, during a meal which was of necessity a mere formal and perfunctory parade, for the emotions they had experienced were not of those which sharpen appetite. The earl was preoccupied and gloomy. Every now and then he stole a melancholy glance at the altered face of his guest. The silvery hair seemed to him like a flame which burned into his heart. When dinner was ended Mrs. Barton prayed to be allowed to retire. He gave her his arm, and conducted her to the door of her room.

"I shall see my godson to-night," he said. "It may be a comfort to you to know that at this moment he is of incalculable service to me—that I could sooner afford to do without my right hand—for it has turned out providentially that he knows all that his father knew of those matters of vital importance which brought him to London. We are now engaged together in the task of vindicating justice and the memory of the dead. It is a painful duty with which I charge myself on your behalf, and rest assured that I shall hesitate at no sacrifice to accomplish it."

Lady Blanche, standing by her father, heard these words. She saw the faint flush of gratification which tinged for a moment the pale features of the mother, but she noted with greater care and in-

terest the earl's language, not only because its panegyric was sweet to her ear, but because again it revealed a new item of intelligence. What was this business, not of an ordinary nature, as she had supposed, but "of vital importance," which had brought the elder Barton up to London—which was now occupying the earl and George Barton together—and which appeared to be unmanning them both?

The earl, who had gone to the library, had not sat there many minutes when Lady Blanche entered, bringing him a cup of tea, to give her countenance. Her face was pale, but determined; the cup trembled in her hand. She found her father sitting moodily in an arm-chair, his head inclined on his hand, an attitude which she knew implied dejection; for his natural pride and vivacity kept his head and figure erect through any amount of physical or mental exertion, unless his spirit was bowed down by some extraordinary emotion. In this posture she had often seen him when he was suffering from the grief of her mother's loss, or, since then, once or twice after some scandalous escapade of his eldest son. For nothing touched this man, whom we know to have been guilty of an act of moral ignominy, more than any attaint of his name or the honor of his house. In such rare moments of depression as his attitude now signified, hers were the only steps that might with impunity break upon his solitude, her voice the only one which did not grate unpleasantly on his ear.

When Lady Blanche came in, her father glanced up without moving—a fact in itself significant, since he always set his sons an example of chivalrous and punctilious politeness to women. He tried to smile, but the smile died away before it was born, and left an almost ghastly contraction of the lips. Then he motioned to her to come near him, and laying down the cup on the table, she threw herself on a low ottoman by his side.

"Blanche," he said, reproachfully, "why did you not prepare me for this dreadful change in poor Mrs. Barton? It was rather thoughtless of you to allow me to be surprised in that fashion. It nearly knocked me over. I could hardly have believed it possible that in two or three days such a fine woman could have been so terribly altered by grief. She looks twenty years older. It is dreadful—quite dreadful!"

"Dreadful indeed, papa," she echoed, in a deep voice. "And it would be more terrible if you—I mean if any of us had, even inadvertently, contributed to it."

There was an under-meaning in her tone which his fine sense immediately perceived. He had been looking on the ground; he quickly fixed his eyes on her face, elevating his eyebrows inquiringly. She saw he was startled.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"My lord, did you know anything of this telegram?"

She held out the fatal slip of pink paper.

Taking it from her hand, he rapidly read it. She saw his eye dilate, his nostrils begin to quiver, his lips to compress tightly. For a moment he appeared hardly to credit his eyes. Then he read it again slowly; his breath came and went painfully; his face blazed up in a sudden wrath; and drawing a long breath, as if he were

gathering all his forces for some mighty effort, he cried out, in a voice loud, strident, intense, as if he had thrown into it all the moral energy of his being,

"God damn them!"

It was not an oath. It was a solemn prayer. The words, in any case, are little more than a popular, reduced edition of the commination service, which I remember was in the Book of Common Prayer the last time I looked at it, and was, I believe, the production of some very reverend and holy persons. It is their too frequent and ingenious application by the vulgar to inadequate cases which has given them the bitter flavor of profanity in the mouths of well regulated persons; but I trust in the present case, where they expressed the violent revolt of the earl's entire manhood against the creatures who had launched this dastardly bolt at the widow of the man they had murdered, the Recording Angel had no difficulty in contributing the obliterative tear. Lady Blanche, who could see and appreciate the feeling with which they were uttered, was not shocked by them, as she would have been under any other circumstances; for there was a genuine solemnity about them—a healthy outburst of indignation with which she sympathized—and, moreover, they relieved her mind of a great anxiety. It was clear the earl had never heard of, nor seen, this message before.

Still, having thus relieved himself, after the fashion in the East (only in a concentrated triple extract form), where a man, after calling down curses on his enemy and all his belongings in the most dreadfully minute and diabolical manner, suddenly calms down and takes a *chibouk*, the earl mastered his emotion, and said in a voice which was gentle, though it still trembled with the afterthroes of that mighty eruption,

"Forgive me, Blanche; I could not restrain myself. These scoundrels—" He bit his lip. Again she saw that he had checked the utterance of some vivid thought. "It was so heartless and thoughtless!"

"Yes, papa. You were saying 'These scoundrels'—by that, of course, you mean Pollard & Pollard?"

"Nothing, Blanche, nothing," he replied, quickly. "My head is a little troubled to-night—naturally—after seeing that poor lady—these solicitors are such fools—they really annoy me—fancy their having no more sense than to send such a cruel, stupid message as that! Of course it seems as if I were responsible."

So he ran on; but Lady Blanche thought the symphony was altogether too weak for the overture, and she was not going to be put off with that.

"Papa," she said, with a slight severity in her tone, "you did not say 'fools'—you said 'scoundrels;' and you know you began by saying"—she gave three nods—"something very much stronger!"

The fine diplomatic nose of the earl scented danger. Nay, his ear and his eye detected that there was something working in his daughter's mind. Was it merely a vague curiosity? Was it a feminine intuition of which he, an old expert, knew the miraculous power? Or was it possible that George Barton might indiscreetly have given his mother some hints which she and Lady Blanche had

been working out together? The very idea of this sent a cold shiver up his spine, and for a moment he hesitated between the policy of turning off the subject altogether, which seemed to be the safest course to take, or of probing to ascertain the exact state of the adversary's knowledge. The crucial anxiety of his situation made him choose the latter course, his old diplomatic rule being, at all risks to ascertain the full strength of your adversary's position. We wish we could report his thoughts with their natural rapidity.

He said to her in the gentlest possible manner, with a touch of irony in his tone and look,

"Well, my dear Blanche, am I to be had up before your majesty's tribunal, with a dictionary under my arm, to verify the exact degree of intensity with which my epithets are to be interpreted? Or is your majesty pleased to demand any further information? Or what is your majesty's pleasure?"

"My lord, this is no joking matter; this is serious—"

"What is serious?" interrupted the earl, vivaciously, and, Blanche thought, looking her through and through.

"Why, all that is now happening—all this horror about Mr. Barton—this frightful mistake about Mrs. Barton, for which, of course, my lord, you are morally responsible—all these mysterious conversations with George Barton—all his sorrow and trouble—and all your evident anxiety, and your disagreement with your solicitors; it's all a dreadful mystery—"

Of course, when a young and inexperienced lady undertakes to measure swords with a veteran diplomatist, she should at least take care to follow the first elementary rule of diplomacy, and not give the adversary any information, or even any hint, of that which she desires to keep secret.

The earl was down upon her at once, and with some severity.

"Why, my dear child, what on earth have you to do with these matters? I assume I can measure and meet my moral responsibility without having recourse to the advice of my daughter—*ætat.* 18—and even manage to select and do business with my agents without explaining my conduct to her. And why should you question me about the subject of my conversation with a young gentleman whom, by the way, you quite too familiarly designate as George Barton, or bother yourself about his sorrows and troubles? Tell me, Blanche, what is it that is prompting you to this indiscreet curiosity; for I do you the justice to own you generally have some reason for what you do or say?"

Lady Blanche saw in a moment that if she remained on this ground she was lost, and she dexterously transferred the entire conflict from the arena of argument to that of emotion, where she knew the earl would be as little at home as an ostrich on the ice.

She suddenly slipped on her knees at his feet and put her arms round him, and at that moment her mother's cross, quite inadvertently on the part of the wearer, met his eye, and sent a shoot of pain through his heart. For he remembered well the purpose to which it used to be kept sacred, and it struck him as peculiar that Blanche should have worn it on this particular night. All experienced and veteran men of the world shrink from sentiment and emotion, in the first place because they are disturbing to the calm

which cynicism affects, and in the second place because they know them to be perilous to that perfect self-command which is the essential quality of an accomplished worldliness. And this white cross, as well as Blanche's manner, gave him a sort of vague presentiment that there was something serious and emotional in the air, like the electric state of the atmosphere which precedes an earthquake or a storm.

"Papa," she said, "you must not be stern and ironic with me, for I love you too dearly to bear it without pain, and you know I am all that is left to you—of—of—" her hand suddenly sought the cross, and she pressed it to her lips. "Remember, I am no longer a little girl, I am a woman; and I am capable now of understanding the causes of your anxieties. I can not shut my eyes to the fact that you have them—that they are grave and worrying—that they are trying your nerves and making you lose your self-command."

The earl started; he had been looking, as she spoke, into those deep, lustrous eyes which met his cold, suspicious, inquisitive gaze with equal tenderness and resolution. Was it possible that she was so clairvoyant—that he had so far betrayed himself? He was annoyed at his own weakness, as Samson must have been when he became conscious that day that his strength had gone from him, under so exiguous an instrumentality as the scissors of Delilah.

"Yes, my lord," she went on, in a stronger voice, noticing the movement, "I have seen that you were nervous and troubled, and more deeply than can be accounted for by anything that appears on the surface, and I should like to be a comfort to you, and a help—at least to share your worries—for to see you like this and not be able even to guess the cause of it almost breaks one's heart." Her two hands were now clasped upon the cross, and he saw a dewy dimness fill her eyes.

He controlled an emotion which had begun to stir his heart, and said, dryly,

"I was not aware that I had become a subject of such close study and analysis to my children—especially to you, my dear, whose thoughts I had supposed to be engaged in much more entertaining and, for you, important studies. Your life is all before you, and you will have quite enough to do in devoting all your attention and judgment, and the tact and cleverness which I do not deny you possess, to the paramount subject of your own future settlement in life, without concerning yourself with your father's anxieties, or intervening in affairs which you could not possibly understand, and in which your interference would be futile, or perhaps mischievous. I think, my dear Blanche," he added, kindly but firmly, as he touched her forehead with his lips, "we had better not pursue this topic any further, and I should prefer that you did not recur to it again."

But she met his eye firmly.

"My lord," she said, "your words are cruel; and though I know that my intelligence and experience may not be of the slightest use to you in your affairs, you forget that you are throwing aside what is, alas, the only source of affectionate sympathy which is left to you. My ambition would have been to try and fill my mother's place in your life, but, my lord, I can not remain a mere spectator

of your trouble. You just now referred ironically to a duty which I owed to myself, and which you were good enough to say was quite enough to occupy my limited intelligence—"

"I did not say limited."

"You implied it, and I admit it. I would much rather that my interests, or my happiness, had not entered into the question; I should like to have felt that I was deserving of your confidence, and capable of offering you at least some of the sympathies of love; but since you put me to it, I must tell you that I have a deep personal interest in learning the nature of your troubles, and in their happy solution."

"You?" he said, quickly. Then he thought for a moment; a curious mixture of anxiety and gladness animated his features. "Oh! did you see Tilbury to-day, then? What has taken place?"

"Why, my lord," she said, like a flash, "what has Tilbury to do with your troubles?"

Check to the king.

"There you are again," he said, peevishly, and turning his eyes away from her clear gaze. "Really, Blanche, this is unendurable! From what you know of me, do you think it likely that I will submit to be cross-examined in this way by my youngest child?"

"Would it be so very strange, my lord, supposing your honor and happiness—and mine, too, were at stake—for me to question you? Ah! I remember now!" She cried out sharply, as if some sudden light had been let in upon her mind. "Tilbury told me that old Mr. Barton had come up to London to settle the accounts of the Tilbury estates! Father—father—surely—it is not possible! There is nothing wrong in those accounts?"

The shot was a chance shot, a singular inspiration, and it told with deadly effect, though the fair artillerist did not know why.

An intense pallor whitened the earl's face; he caught her arm excitedly, and said, in a low, frightened voice,

"Why, Blanche, Blanche—what do you know? What have you heard? Who has been saying anything? What do you mean?"

"So there is something, my lord," she said, brushing past all his queries, "which involves our honor and happiness!"

"Pooh!" he ejaculated, angry and mortified at having been caught in so simple a trap. "I have admitted nothing of the kind. I only feared that some one had been gossiping about my affairs; and I can not allow that—I won't allow that!"

"My lord, there is something—I know there is—something grave, serious, dreadful—something between you and George Barton—something you are anxious to conceal—something which holds him back from having justice done on his father's murderers! Do you know that it has nearly driven him mad?"

Barton's mysterious words had suddenly recurred to her: "Scoundrels, whose guilt it was not possible for you to prove without bringing shame upon some you respected and loved."

The peer turned upon his daughter as if he had been stung.

"What is that to you?" he said, fiercely. "What is George Barton to you? What does it matter to you whether he is mad or sane?"

"Oh father, father!" she cried out, in a voice of anguish, "I love him!"

For an instant she glanced at his terrible face, and then she sunk down, still on her knees, crouching, with her head bent forward and her face in her hands; and thus she waited, keenly alive, expectant, palpitating, for the blow which she felt must fall, not from his hand—it is French and Italian counts who strike women—but from his lips.

Had she been the weeping Magdalen, whose attitude in a celebrated picture she had unconsciously assumed, and he a Pharisee, the peer could hardly have looked at her with a more pitiless scorn. The transition from the magnificent idea of Lord Tilbury to the commonplace reality of George Barton—we mean strictly from the point of view of a great English earl—was too prodigious not to shake the very foundations of his equanimity, and topple over the entire superstructure. His passions were boiling up, like a geyser suddenly uncovered by an earthquake. The flame that flashed in those cold, gray eyes of his was lurid as the blue lightning—flashed we say—because the peculiarity of this man's temperament was the perfect natural balance between two great forces of passion and reason, the iron control which, by long years of experience, the one had been able to establish over the other, and the phenomenal rapidity of the interaction between them. The flame died out in a moment; his face became dark as night.

For a short time he was silent, passing in review, with marvelous quickness, the salient incidents of his recent interviews with George Barton, searching his keen, accurate memory for some word or gesture, some side hint that the young man might have let slip of his daring ambition; for the earl could not possibly have guessed at the real facts—the scene in the Temple, for instance—and he naturally supposed that his daughter's avowal ensued from a long-matured understanding, or, as he put it to himself, a prolonged course of deceit. He found it impossible to recall anything that even his sharp instincts could fasten upon, and he was forced to give the young man the undeserved credit of being one of the most discreet and clever diplomatists it had ever been his lot to meet. That, however, by no means appeased the severity of his judgment, and it certainly increased the sense of danger.

All his gratitude for the nobility of Barton's conduct, all his own repentant feelings and generous emotions, his sworn obligations, the extorted trust and admiration of the past twenty-four hours were, at one sweep of the sponge, wiped off the calendar of his mind. The damnable fact alone remained that Barton had dared to love the Earl of Selby's daughter; and the suspicion followed close, as the report follows the flash, that George was using the power he had acquired over the earl's destinies to further his own audacious projects.

Let any one consider how perfectly natural this suspicion was, and how intensely unfounded, and then lay up in his heart how perilous a thing it is to judge of the actions or motives of a fellow-man.

For a little while, I say, he remained silent, raging and ponder-

ing. When he did speak, he showed what a profound wrath was burning in his soul, for he utterly forgot himself.

He rose, and taking no notice of his daughter, paced the room, soliloquizing,

"By Heaven," he said, bitterly, "it seems as if every one were in a conspiracy to drive me mad! One thing after another—and this, the cruelest blow of all! The young whelp!"—Lady Blanche started and listened eagerly—"I could never have believed it possible that such madness should have entered his head. Humph! anything is possible with human beings except to be true and sincere; I have had bitter enough experience of that. But I thought I was too old to be deceived. It is that damnable business of Tilbury's which has deranged my judgment. I should have foreseen so commonplace a maneuver as this. Ha, Master Barton! so the price I am to pay for keeping your mouth shut is—the hand of an earl's daughter—the best match in England—to keep a student's tongue from wagging! That is your bargain, is it?"

"It is false, my lord! you know it is false!"

With a cry that rung through the room, Lady Blanche suddenly straightened herself up and faced the earl, still on her knees, furious as Alecto, inspired like a Pythoness, stretching her hand out, as if at once accusing him and appealing to Heaven against him. Her voice, usually a sweet, silvery treble, changed in the intensity of her emotion to a deep contralto, and he could see her eyes glowing with vivid light.

"Ah!" she almost shrieked; "I see it all now! There is some shameful secret connected with Tilbury's accounts—which was known to Mr. Barton—which is known to his son—which you, the Earl of Selby, are trying to hush up! Is it for this, my lord, that you allowed an infamous accusation to be made against an honorable man—that you have inflicted an irreparable injury on a noble woman—that you have been trying to get 'the whelp,' as you call him, to be silent, and forego the infliction of justice on his father's murderers? You—father!—you would condescend to accept such a sacrifice! Why, you said it, my lord, you said it!" she cried, excitedly, seeing that the earl made a gesture of impatient denial. "Poor George Barton! No wonder he has nearly lost his reason! But I never would have believed that you—my father—would have condescended to such a bargain—no, not even if all your fortune depended on it!"

The earl stood paralyzed and speechless. The overwhelming physical and moral fury of the attack—and coming from his daughter—was like a bolt out of a clear sky.

She seemed to have risen up out of the ground like an accusing spirit, beautiful, superb, implacable. There was just enough color of truth in the accusations her excited fancy had conjured up to strike what I may call the superstitious sense of a guilty man, even though he were as strong and skeptical as the Earl of Selby. Her appearance, too, in her white dress, with her head thrown back, her fine nostrils quivering, her eyes aflame, her lips curling with scorn, her exquisite young figure undulating with the movements of passion, the cross—his wife's cross—shining on her heaving throat—formed altogether a superb, awful, complex statue of passion. It

was Greek in its marvelous beauty and heathen implacability, Dantesque in its deep volcanic energy, Romanic in its chivalrous audacity—and, with that cross of Christian hope on its breast, seemed to draw its moral indignation from the severe sources of Christian enthusiasm. The quick observer, to whom Æschylus and Dante and Shakespeare and Goethe were familiar spirits, was struck by it, as an embodiment of the finest passion of all the grand ages. And then he could almost have imagined that his wife had risen from her grave to denounce him!

Trembling, he ran forward and seized her hand, while his face, covered with a sweat of agony, bent over her.

"Blanche, Blanche! for God's sake don't look at me like that! I have done wrong—I have done wrong—but nothing so base as you imagine. Blanche, you shall know all; I do not deserve this dreadful denunciation. Oh, Blanche, Blanche, take back those words if you would not break your father's heart!"

His movement broke the spell of her passion, and under the reaction she sunk back a little, with one hand on her heart. She looked up at him, regretful, appealing.

"Forgive me, father!" she murmured, in low, broken tones—"forgive me! I see in your face that I have wronged you: but oh, father, father, you see how I love him! And you wronged him so! You charged him, whom I knew to be innocent—whom I knew to be sacrificing himself for you—and me—you charged him with baseness and deceit—and that—in order to win me! And I had just told you that I loved him, and I knew it to be false. It cut me to the heart—and—and I don't know, but it seemed suddenly as if my soul took fire and I must speak But you will forgive me?"

She felt his hand trembling in hers, while his face looked grave, troubled, irresolute. The impulse that had led him to her side, and to the emotional weakness of his surrender and appeal had been a very complex one, defying analysis; for some of the causes were moral, some æsthetic—the classic grandeur of her passion, for instance—some physical, some spiritual—such as the superstitious influence of the cross—and some resulted from a rapid action of his mind and judgment; but one thing that had not animated him was any alteration of his feelings in regard to George Barton. And here, with that strange, one-ideaed pertinacity of woman, after terrifying him into a confession—an incredible performance—and in the very act of imploring his forgiveness, she vindicated and affirmed her love.

Yet he was conscious that, although she was on her knees at his feet, in the attitude of humility, the moral victory was hers. Any man against whom a moral accusation is leveled by one whose own moral position is unassailable must be a poor creature if he can fancy that that which is true in it does not attaint him because it is mixed with false, or is not formulated with legal precision. If Lady Blanche had not caught the exact truth, the purity and generosity of her motives, the undercurrent of justice in her denunciation, had struck vitally home; and we have seen by his words that, while he flinched from the exaggerations, he was too noble to deny his guilt. And now, when she avouched young Barton's integrity and candor of action, he felt that she must have had good grounds for doing it.

The natural justness, the chivalry of his nature, told the earl that he had been ungenerous, that disappointment and anger had warped his judgment, that Barton could not have acted with him and toward him as he had done yesterday and to-day, while nursing such Mephistophelian projects as had been imputed to him. Still, the earl was puzzled. There was the fact that Barton loved Lady Blanche, that she loved Barton, and that the secret had been kept from him.

But one of the first things that comes back to the practiced man of the world in any of those rare crises which incontinently disturb his equilibrium is his dignity, the conservation of which has become an instinct. And in this supreme moment the earl's sense of dignity revived, along with the rush of affection for his daughter. In the most graceful manner in the world he bent down and impressed a kiss upon her forehead, and in calm, gentle, grave tones answered her appeal:

"Whatever needs forgiveness, my dear daughter, I forgive—with all my heart. There has been a regrettable misunderstanding." (It is thus that a man of tact wraps up in *bonbon* paper all the painful memories of a disagreeable incident, and almost deludes himself and others into believing that what has happened was, after all, less serious than it seemed!) "We have been skirmishing in the dark. It is evident that we are both misinformed—both mistaken as to the facts on either side. But, Blanche, believe me, my dear girl, if I have been silent about the grave matters which have been troubling me, it was for your good, your happiness and peace of mind. On the other hand, Blanche, do you think you have been quite so candid with me as our relations—as my affection for you—justified me in expecting? In the middle of infinite anxieties of mind and heart, you have suddenly sprung a surprise upon me the gravity of which you can not be sensible of. You can hardly wonder that, for the moment, it unnerved me. I am so surprised that I am unable to judge of it with the calmness and consideration which a subject ofsuch vital importance demands. This," he said, touching the cross on her bosom, "reminds me how irreparable a loss we have both sustained, the sharpness of which comes home to us when we have to face such questions as these. And it reminds me, too, how great and delicate is that responsibility which I now have to carry alone." His voice trembled. She threw her arm round him, and rested her head against his side. "But, dearest Blanche, this token will suggest to you how much I have lost—how greatly I need the affection and solace which you alone remain to supply. Indeed, we are necessary to each other; and now that so few years of life are left to me, the moments are too precious to be troubled by disagreements or darkened by misunderstandings. You have expanded suddenly into a woman of rare force of character—and, I fear, along with some of his better qualities, you have inherited some of the graver faults of your father's temperament. This should make us merciful to each other. The pain we have both experienced to-night—sharp and deep as it was—will not have been without its benefit if it have taught us that, and if it leave us henceforth to the calm enjoyment of mutual love and confidence."

The delicacy of this little argument, with its unaffected simplicity and candor, struck the fine chords of Lady Blanche's nature with the sympathetic touch of a master-hand. The man who could speak thus had not only a finely-tempered nature—he had, somewhere, a true heart, if at times it refused to denote its presence in the right place to the most careful auscultation. There are hearts of this kind which seem to shift about in men's systems as if they were foreign objects, and only now and then turn up in the center to resume their proper functions.

"And now," he added, after a little pause, "let me help you to your feet, for I should not like Colston to catch us in this melodramatic attitude."

"Father," she said, taking both his hands and looking up into his eyes, "I shall never call you 'papa' again; before I get up, let me promise you here solemnly on my knees that, however deeply I may love—him—I will do nothing, I will not even see him without your consent. I must have the agreement of your judgment and your heart. And, father," she added, with a graceful gesture, a blush, a quiet, decided smile, "it may be years in coming, but you will give it—I'm sure you will!"

While he shook his head, gravely smiling, he raised her to her feet and put her arm in his.

"Let us walk up and down the room a few minutes," he said. "I will tell you, dear Blanche, what is the cause of all my troubles, and you shall tell me how all this has come about. It is understood—is it not?—that henceforth there are to be no secrets between us?"

She pressed his hand to her side as the only answer, and the earl, now in full possession of himself, sketched out for her, rapidly and graphically, the outlines of the situation. He did not attempt to extenuate his error, any more than he had done to young Barton, who was, by a curious fatality, the only other confidant of his secret.

Lady Blanche was naturally pained and shocked at this revelation; for until to-night her eyes had discerned no spots on the bright disk of her father's character, and her fine nature invincibly recoiled from any moral weakness. But his pain, the severity with which he judged his own conduct, his evident repentance and desire to repair his fault, as well as the assurance that it could be done completely by a limited sacrifice of his fortune, alleviated to some extent her grief at this discovery. One thing only could restore them both to happiness: the soiled escutcheon must be cleaned, and his reparation be complete. Above all, she sympathized with his desire that this should be done without exposing him to his sister, to the young Earl of Tilbury, or to the rest of the family. But still she felt that there was a duty to be performed of even greater importance than the satisfaction of his self-esteem.

In the strength of her own moral position, she could not but gather greater freedom in making her own confession. Blushing, but frank, and eloquent with the inspiration of love, she told him all. Lord Charles's hair would have stood on end had he known how his father and sister were engaged at that moment. They had already reached a point which he could only see in faint perspective at the end of a troublous journey of years.

When the truth was all before him, the earl had the candor to

admit that young Barton's character was free from blame. He flinched at his daughter's bold confession, while he marked the depth and intensity of her feeling; he saw himself reflected in her impulsiveness; he also noted the signs of that firm resolution which had distinguished her from childhood; but he was still very far from capitulation. The outworks of aristocratic pride often hold out longer than the citadel of morality.

"Now, Blanche," he said, "what is to be done? Of course you will give me time to think over so grave a matter as yours, and in doing so I shall be governed wholly by consideration of your future happiness. But, you see, this other business will not wait. It demands immediate action."

She stood opposite him with her hands thrown behind her back, the fingers interlaced, an attitude which defined and emphasized the classic beauty of her figure.

"Father," she said, "there is only one thing to do. No matter what comes of it to you—to us—you must not let those villains escape. At any risk you must let the police know at once what the grounds of suspicion against them are."

"What! and expose all my business?"

"If necessary, dear father, even that. But I don't see that you need do that at present. You can rest the case against them, can't you, entirely in their defalcations and the forgery discovered by poor Mr. Barton? But there are two pressing reasons for immediate action."

"Expound them to me, most wise Minerva!"

"I see you are becoming yourself again—you are getting malicious; but they are both very serious. One concerns you personally."

"Me?"

"Yes, dear father. It flashed across my mind while you were explaining the matter to me. Did it not occur to you that you are so mixed up with these people that if you remained too silent too long and their guilt should be established, you might be exposed to a very ugly suspicion?".

Had it occurred to him? Had not young Barton brought it home to him only too terribly but yesterday? But he had not told her anything about that.

"Well, and the second?"

"Relates to—Mr.—Barton. Don't you see what is holding him back? It is a delicacy about compromising you—"

"It appears to me," said the earl, with a grim smile, "that there is a stronger reason than that, which I had not suspected; it is the *in*delicacy of his regard for some one else."

"That may have something to do with it," she said, blushing and smiling, "but whatever the motive, you see he is in a painful dilemma, from which he can not extricate himself without doing violence to his feelings on one side or the other."

The earl started with surprise at the justness of this appreciation. The intuition of love had detected that which, up to this moment, had escaped his own quick apprehension.

"Why, what made you think of that?" he inquired.

"Something which fell from him inadvertently to-day, for I

must tell you he kept your secret manfully against Charlie and me."

"Hum! So it seems. It is rather late in life to have learned such a lesson, but I make a vow that, if ever I have a secret again, I will never go within a hundred yards of a woman. Well, and you wish to have him relieved from this dilemma?"

"We owe it to him—to his mother—not to allow him to remain in this painful position one moment longer than we can help it. Father, I think you ought to tell the police of your suspicions immediately."

She glanced at the clock. He noticed the movement.

"What! to-night?" he cried, in a voice of dismay. "It is a quarter to ten!"

"Think, my dear father! I know you are weary, but a few hours may make a difference. It is the first act of reparation, and I want above all to see you separated this hour, by a definite act, from the villains who sent that telegram. We shall both of us sleep more happily when that is done. He must know nothing about it. Neither you nor I should see him to-night. I expect he and Charlie are in the house now. Let me order a hansom, and drive with you to Scotland Yard. The night is fine, and I will wait for you to bring you home."

"You are right, Blanche. Ah, what would I not give to have your youth, your energy, your ingenuous confidence and impetuous enthusiasm! Well," he added, pulling the bell, "*fiat voluntas tua, dea implacabilis!* The time may be precious, and many a weary night have I spent working for an ungrateful country at matters of far less practical importance. Colston, has anybody come in?"

"Lord Charles is in the billiard-room, your lordship, and Mr. Barton is with Mrs. Barton."

"Without saying anything to them, send for a handsom. I shall drive as far as the House of Commons. When Mr. Barton comes down-stairs give him my compliments and say that, to my great regret, I am obliged to go out on important business, and beg him to excuse me. Say that I shall have the pleasure of calling upon him to-morrow."

Lady Blanche had already disappeared. In less than three minutes she returned, enveloped in a long, dark mantle, and wearing a toque and veil. When a woman chooses, she can perform a toilet with the rapidity of a Patagonian, but then she chooses only about twice in a lifetime.

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Deep was the disappointment of George Barton when, on rejoining Lord Charles, he received the earl's message, and learned that Lady Blanche had gone out. He had counted at least on seeing her and pressing her hand, and she had vanished without even leaving him a word. He looked blankly at Lord Charles, who looked quite as blankly at him.

"Here's a pretty go!" remarked the young lord. "The peer and peri gone off together on a nocturnal expedition—in a hansom—my dear fellow, in a hansom. The peer has given the address as the House of Commons; but do you know what I suspect? She has confessed, and he has taken her off to Bethlehem Hospital. I have

had the curiosity to cross-examine Colston as to how she was dressed —a dark waterproof and cap and veil. And do you know the earl had the cunning to give directions that we were not to be told of it till they had gone? What do you think of that? Call you that proper treatment of a lover?"

"Do be serious, Charles," said Barton, peevishly, for he was profoundly perplexed by this mysterious maneuver. "What does it really mean?"

"My dear fellow, I don't know any more than you do. I have told you the strict truth. The fugitives appear to have been closeted together in the library since dinner-time; the peer rings for a hansom, the peri dons a cloak, and they vanish. But if you want my serious opinion, I should say, knowing the young lady, there is something up. As for the earl, I have long since given up guessing at his motives for any particular line of action as a ridiculous waste of time—nearly as unsatisfactory and exasperating as trying to fish the skin of the milk out of a bowl of French coffee. Did you ever try it? But there, you see, if all eggs were transparent there would be no addled ones sold, and trade would suffer; and if all men could be seen through, the earl's occupation would be gone, for diplomacy would be an impossibility. But Blanche is different —clear as a glass of water. And after what took place to-day, she would never have gone out and left us in the lurch in this way unless something very serious were in the wind, that's my solemn conviction."

"Which does not bring us one whit nearer a solution."

"True—exactly like 'Paley's Evidences.'"

Profound inquietude and discontent settled down on Barton's mind when, after spending a long hour in vain conjecture, he had taken leave of Lord Charles toward midnight; and started to walk to the Temple. Who that has experienced the weakness of love does not know how small a *contretemps* will suddenly chill the fever of the spirit and wrap the heart in gloom? His mother's subdued joy, and its animating effects upon her feelings and condition, had cheered his heart. He felt so grateful to the noble girl for thus quickening his mother's energies by her ingenuous avowal, and his happiness would have been complete could he only have whispered or looked his feelings into her ear or eye. Now there was not merely disappointment, but anxiety. What could this strange movement mean? Had they gone to Lady Tilbury? or was it not that Blanche had told the earl of her love, and that he had invented a pretext to prevent their meeting? This, being the most painful supposition, was naturally the one which his mind nursed as the most probable, and it filled him with presentiments of trouble and sorrow. No need to describe how thought chased thought, and one gloomy fancy followed on another, as hurrying clouds in a September sky. Occupied with his reflections, he had mechanically taken the route along Wigmore Street to Cavendish Square, and thence down Prince's Street, when, turning into Oxford Street, he became conscious with a shudder that he was at Regent Circus—on the scene of his father's murder.

Oh, he had been there since then! He had seen it by day and by night. Every feature of it was photographed in deep Rembrandt

shadows on his heart. And just now, when that little check had rolled back upon themselves the gushing fountains of his love and created a little whirlpool in his soul, he found himself there, once more in face of his grief—and of his vengeance. At that hour of the night the turbulent movement of the Circus traffic has died down. The pavements are no longer filled with an eddying crowd. The omnibuses come up few and crawling. The lighter traffic of carriages and cabs has dwindled down to mere units swiftly coming and departing. At the corners gather a few scores of home-going persons waiting to take their places in the omnibuses; gay and yet sad night-birds of both sexes flit here and there; two or three policemen gossip under the lamps with each other, or with those passing scores of chance acquaintances which every one who has any stationary duty in a great city is sure to make with the frequenters of the streets. The loud roar of the human waves has ceased, and the tide is ebbing, growing gentler, as it recedes, until at length it settles down, far in the night, into almost perfect calm and silence.

He paused for a moment, and then imposing a firm control upon his feelings, he went and stood there upon the spot where, still vigorous in life, active in intelligence, anxious, but brave, busy with the interests of time, duty, affection, and all unconscious of the dark-winged messenger which was hovering above the crowd and had fixed its fatal eye on him, his father had changed, in the twinkling of an eye, from body to atoms, from soul to spirit.

There was nothing to mark the spot. The roadway had been mended. Thousands of feet now trod it daily with indifferent steps —the ground where a brother man had been foully slain. Only last week—but the tale had already begun to drift into legend. One of four millions! What is that? Who can stay to count the leaves of a forest as they fall?

George Barton stood there musing.

He did not see or hear a policeman pointing at him, and saying to a curious American from the Langham Hotel,

"Why, right there, sir, where you see that gen'leman a-standin'; that's the very spot!"

Had he heard that, he must have turned and fled; but fate had willed it otherwise.

He was lost in thought. His father's figure seemed to come up before him just as he was in life, gentle, genial, firm, with the dignity of virtue, and the frank, clear eyes of a perfect integrity.

He could almost fancy that the figure looked at him earnestly, as if searching into his inmost soul, and asking,

"Is thy heart true? Dost thou shrink from thy duty? Doth aught stand between thee and thy love and loyalty to me? Wilt thou see that my honor is vindicated—that the good name I treasured so highly is not trampled in the dust by feet so foul as those of my murderers? Are they to go unpunished? Remember, son, that life or love or fortune is none of them so precious to thee as thy father's honor, for, if thou be worthy of it, it is thine own; if thou permit a spot to rest upon it, it is to thy eternal shame!"

Thus did the shade which his vivid but gloomy imagination had conjured up appear to speak to him as he stood on the last ground its living feet had trod.

"Father," he murmured, "if you can see into my heart, you know that it is, and will be, faithful to you and duty. As I live, your memory shall be made as stainless as your life, your murderers shall meet with justice, if to secure this I have to tear out of my heart a precious love, and forego all my hopes and ambitions. Father, here, where you perished, I consecrate all to the vindication of your honor and your life."

Even as he spoke, and laid, as it were, the sacrifice on the altar; even as the struggle between duty and desire had thus ended with the victory of duty, an answering message of hope and approbation seemed to have been sent to him—almost as though it had dropped from the clouds. There was a sharp cry. He started and jumped back, just in time to escape from being crushed by a hansom, which had come swiftly up Regent Street, and was close upon him before he was aware. Happily, he was facing it, and a slight movement enabled him to avoid it. His eye fell upon the occupants. A veil was quickly drawn aside, a white handkerchief fluttered, flew out and fell at his feet. Lady Blanche! The earl leaned forward, waved his hand, and cried out in a voice bright, strong, cheering, "To-morrow, Barton!" and they were gone.

He picked up the tiny, lace-edged web of cambric and thrust it into his bosom, and his heart told him at that moment that a way would be found of reconciling love and duty.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAST DREGS OF THE CUP OF HUMILIATION.

LATE in the evening of the same eventful Tuesday the Chief Commissioner of Police and Mr. Sontag were closeted together in the latter's room. The chief commissioner had come in from a conference he had been having with the Home Secretary in his private room at the House of Commons; for, during the session, in those dingy little holes which are assigned to the use of ministers in that mean but pretentious building many an important act of State is decided, and not a little public business is done. The Invincibles were seeking to take advantage of the excitement produced by the Regent Circus mystery, to alarm the authorities with threats of new outrages, and all the public buildings were being watched to prevent surprise. Meantime it had become very important to the Secretary of State to disprove as promptly as possible the general notion that the Fenians had been at the bottom of that startling crime, and the commissioner was anxious to know what progress had been made during the day in the investigation of the circumstances.

McLaren's disappearance had excited profound disquiet in the minds of all the officials. It indicated that the organization they were endeavoring to unmask and outwit was one of extraordinary daring, cleverness, and resource. In one particular, the Home Secretary and chief commissioner both admitted, Mr. Sontag's presumptions had turned out to be correct. There was no doubt that the agent of the Earl of Selby, George Barton the elder, was the person who had been the victim of the crime. Such being the victim, and such the character of his enemies, who could those enemies be?

There was the rub! So far as the knowledge of the police extended up to the present moment, Mr. Barton had no enemies. On the contrary, all the information they could gather went to prove the quiet, amicable character of all his relations. Even the Earl of Selby, when he had accused him, through his solicitors, of running away with his property had seemed wounded and astonished, and spoke of the long friendship that had existed between them as an aggravation of the supposed offense. One exception only to this general testimony had not escaped the chief detective's observation. Mr. Sontag, Garbett, every one who had come in contact with Pollard & Pollard, noticed that there was an underground of animosity in their feelings against the agent. These were the last persons with whom he had been engaged in serious business. Sontag, reviewing the case, pointed this out to his chief, and owned that after the earl's conduct in the morning they could not entertain any doubts of his sincerity and innocence.

"Indeed," said Sontag, "the state of affairs disclosed to-day is very curious and mysterious. You will follow me, sir, point by point?"

Sir Henry nodded.

"The day that Mr. Barton disappeared young Mr. Barton applied to the police to help him to find out what had become of his father, and his manner, his anxiety, and grief satisfied us that he, at all events, was not acting in collusion with the old gentleman. Next day, Friday, information is lodged here by Pollard & Pollard, assuming to act as solicitors for the Earl of Selby."

"Why do you say assuming?"

"Because from what has happened since I guess that the earl rather permitted than directed them to act as they did, and since then he has practically thrown them over."

"That is a very strange state of things," said the commissioner.

"It is, sir, and grows stranger the more one examines it. You see, Mr. Barton was Lord Selby's agent and solicitor. Why, then, should he have employed Pollard & Pollard as well?"

The chief detective stuck his head forward, and peered at the commissioner in that provoking way which was habitual to him when about to put the astuteness of any one with whom he was conversing to the test.

"I don't see why not, though I suppose you do. Confound your conundrums, Sontag—let us get on!"

"I beg pardon, Sir Henry. The same firm were solicitors to the estate of the Earl of Tilbury, of which Lord Selby was the surviving executor, and also to the countess, his sister. Do you not think it rather odd, if not irregular, that the same lawyers should be acting personally for the earl, as well as on account of the estate of his ward?"

"I don't know enough about such things to pass an opinion; but no one would think of criticising such an arrangement in the case of the Earl of Selby, a man of unblemished honor, and, I should think, quite as rich as young Tilbury."

"I am not so sure about that, sir. I believe not. At all events his estates are not so productive as Lord Tilbury's, and there is this

difference—Lord Tilbury's estates are free from incumbrances, while I have ascertained that the Earl of Selby has recently been raising large sums of money through these very solicitors."

"How do you know that?" inquired the commissioner.

"I have Garbett at work in the Pollards' office. One of their clerks has given him some general information, though he is unwilling to supply particulars, or, more probably has no knowledge of them. The proceedings appear to be highly mysterious. Now, Sir Henry, you follow me? The Earl of Selby has an agent, a solicitor, and a very able man, Mr. Barton, who does everything; nevertheless the earl employs Pollard & Pollard, solicitors to his ward and to his sister, to raise large sums of money for him for unknown purposes; and although the business has been in hand for some time, Mr. Barton has never turned up in it until about ten days before his disappearance. He transacts the business, or reviews it, with Pollard & Pollard, the earl, by the way, being meanwhile out of town. Then, sir, he is murdered."

"Curious, certainly, but still all quite capable of explanation," said the chief commissioner.

"But, sir, the peculiarity of the situation is this, following on what I have described. The Earl of Selby has shown no great *animus* against Barton; the Pollards have. To-day he is taking active steps to discover the perpetrator of the crime; to-day the Pollards have withdrawn from any further pursuit of inquiries as to Barton's fate. And regarding that, something very significant has happened this afternoon."

"Eh! something new!" cried the commissioner.

"Yes, sir; but with your permission I will take things in order," continued Mr. Sontag, shuffling some papers which were docketed and lay on the table at his hand. "Well, sir, Mr. Barton, coming up to London on this business, holds long conferences with Pollard & Pollard, the latest on Wednesday afternoon last, which was of so stormy a character as to excite the curiosity of the clerks in Pollards' office. That was his last appearance in that office. Second notable fact. The third arises out of the advertisement which those gentlemen inserted in yesterday's and to-day's papers. I refer to the fact, stated therein, that a number of valuable documents and bonds had disappeared with Barton."

"Did they consult you about that advertisement?"

"No, though they saw me on Saturday, when, of course they must have sent it to the papers for insertion on Monday."

"Well, Mr. Sontag?"

"I have noted down the information I have collected about those papers in the order of time of the happening of the facts; it is more than curious. I will read my memorandum; you can rely on the accuracy of each fact:

"'*Monday, June 23d.*—Mr. Barton entered Pollards' with a large bag—full of papers brought in a hansom. When he went away the bag was empty. It was of limp leather, and when empty could be doubled up under the arm.

"'*Wednesday, 25th.*—Visit of Mr. Barton to Pollard & Pollard,

Stormy interview. Mr. B. "very much excited and trembling when he went away."

"'*Thursday, 26th.*—Death of Mr. Barton in Regent Circus, on his way to an appointment with the Earl of Selby.

"'*Friday, 27th.*—Pollard & Pollard informed the police of the flight of Mr. Barton with a lot of papers, etc., of great value.

"'*Saturday, 28th.*—Mr. Charles Pollard went down by midday train to his country seat in Kent, returning same evening. Took with him a heavy bag, seeming to contain law-papers. The porter noticed this, as he had the bag in his hand and put it into the cab.

"'*Monday, 30th.*—Advertisement appears in London journals, offering reward for recovery of George Barton with deeds of title, bonds, etc., signed "Pollard & Pollard, solicitors to the Rt. Hon. the Earl of Selby, K. G."

"'12.15.—Visit of the Earl of Selby to Pollard & Pollard, and subsequently to Mr. George Barton, jun., in the Temple.

"'9 P.M.—Mr. George Barton, jun., visited the earl at his house in Portman Square, and remained till 12.40 A.M. this morning.'

"Now, Sir Henry, we come—please note what I am going to read—to to-day:

"'*Tuesday, July 1st*, 11.35 A.M.—Letter received at Scotland Yard from Pollard & Pollard, stating that the missing papers had been found mislaid in their office, withdrawing the advertisement, and all pursuit after Mr. Barton, senior, professedly acting for their client.

"'11.45.—The Earl of Selby calls in Scotland Yard, states that the Earl of Tilbury, having come to himself, had identified the victim in Regent Circus as Mr. Barton, repudiates the advertisement of Pollard & Pollard, and directs a reward of £2000 to be offered for the recovery of Mr. Barton's murderers.

"'2 P.M.—Mr. Charles Pollard, returning from his place in the country, where he had gone at about 10.15 A.M., brings back to his office a bag—the same taken down on Saturday, and apparently containing the same contents it did then.

"2.10 P.M.—Pollard & Pollard refuse to give the police a list of the documents alleged to have been lost.

"'5 P.M.—The said list is received at Scotland Yard.'

"I ought to mention, Sir Henry, that no communication had taken place this morning between the earl and Pollard & Pollard previous to their letter. I have good reason to believe that they did not know of his intention to offer that reward, and, on the other hand, he did not know the bonds and other papers had been found. Indeed, the earl did not see Pollard until nearly four o'clock in the afternoon, after paying a visit at Lord Tilbury's and to the City. Now, sir, I sent on Mr. Garbett for a list of those documents which the two Pollards at first peremptorily refused, and were rather rough on Garbett; but they sent it to me later in the day, and I have it here."

"When you talk of a bagful of documents," inquired the chief commissioner, "do you refer to any considerable bulk?"

"I refer to such a bulk, Sir Henry, as it was utterly impossible

to mislay. That is Garbett's opinion, who saw the bag Mr. Charles Pollard carried, and the room in which it was alleged the papers had been overlooked. Moreover, Pollards' own clerk, whose duty it was to arrange the papers in that room every night and morning, avers that they could not possibly have been overlooked there. Why, sir, there was £55,000 in United States bonds, which would make a big parcel in itself."

"Why, Mr. Sontag," said the chief commissioner, gravely, "this in itself is very suspicious. A deliberate attempt to fasten on an innocent man a charge of theft of property which was all the time in their own posseession! What on earth can it mean? The Pollards are regarded as immaculate."

"So was Satan once, sir, according to Mr. John Milton," replied Mr. Sontag. "Now, when you add to this little shuffle the circumstance that, in following up Mr. Charles Pollard into such a neighborhood as that of Wapping at a late hour of night (when and where he could not possibly have had any legitimate business, especially as he went disguised), our man, McLaren, has come to grief—murdered beyond any question—are we not justified in fixing very strong suspicions on these immaculate gentlemen?"

"Not only that, but in taking some action immediately," cried Sir Henry.

"They are under strict surveillance already. If they try to run away they will be stopped. But you see, sir, we have three weak spots in our case, and we dare not move against such people as they are on mere suspicion. They are not poor devils who have no money or character. A mistake would ruin us. First, you observe, we have no actual proof that Barton was murdered; second, we have no proof that the papers taken to Kent on Saturday were the papers alleged to have been stolen; third, we have no proof that the papers brought from Kent were the papers taken there on Saturday. And yet I don't suppose you have a shadow of doubt what the facts are?"

"Not the least. But what conceivable motive was there for all this shuffling?"

"I have racked my brains till they ached to work out a hypothesis. You see, sir, it does not necessarily point to any complicity with the murder," said Mr. Sontag.

"Why not?" asked the commissioner.

"They removed the papers the second day after the murder. Had they done so the day it occurred, the suspicion would have been overwhelming. But they may simply be dishonest, and, learning that the only man who had any knowledge of the bonds being in their possession was dead, they might have thought of impounding them; then, on reflection, seeing the difficulty of doing anything with them, they may have reproduced them."

"No, Sontag, that won't do. I've been thinking while you spoke. What do you think of this? They trump up a charge against the dead man in order to throw us off the scent."

Sontag started. It was the flash of light he wanted. He thought a minute, and then said doubtfully, for he never liked to be outdone in sharpness even by his chief,

"Y—e—es; but why, then, do they reproduce them?"

"Because, I expect they have heard that the Circus mystification has so far failed that it is known that Barton was the victim, and of course the question would then arise, where are the bonds? But whose property were they?"

"The list does not say," replied Mr. Sontag. "The deeds appear to be Lady Tilbury's. The bonds would be to bearer. It's a curious mixture. I have never come across such a complicated case."

"Well, the Earl of Selby could throw some light upon it," said the commissioner; "or perhaps the Countess of Tilbury or her son."

"But there, sir, is the difficulty; the earl will tell nothing; young Barton is as tight as a nut. He and the earl have become reconciled since Lord Tilbury set all doubts at rest by his declaration."

"Is the earl sincere?"

"I think so: and more than that, he and young Barton to-day both hinted that they suspected somebody. But they don't seem inclined to trust us with their suspicions, and, you may depend upon it, there is one of those family secrets involved in this business which mystifies the whole matter, and which, unless we look out very sharply, will lead to a failure of justice. The earl may be traying to buy over young Barton to keep the secret."

At this moment a smart policeman entered the cabinet with a card. The commissioner glanced at it in surprise, and handed it to his subordinate, who elevated his eyebrows.

"Say nothing," said the commissioner to the other in German; "let him do all the talking." Then, turning to the man, he said in English, "Ask the earl to come in."

The peer entered with his habitual easy, dignified manner, but the two great policemen, who instinctively looked up to read his face, saw that he had some grave intelligence to communicate.

"I must apologize, Sir Henry," he said, "for troubling you at so late an hour; indeed, I hardly expected I should be so fortunate as to see you."

"We have no night or day in this office," said the commissioner, smiling, "and we were just engaged in discussing the question of your agent's murder as you came in. I wish, earl, you could throw some further light on the case, for it is very obscure."

"My object in seeking you at such an unseasonable hour," said the peer, "is to make a clean breast of all I know, lest, through my silence, there should be a failure of justice. I must tell you frankly I am placed in a very delicate and even a very critical position by what I am about to tell you; and it was not until late last night, or rather early this morning, that my suspicions were aroused and directed against the persons whom I am going to indicate to you."

"Indeed!" said the commissioner, with interest, while Mr. Sontag peered at the earl with evident excitement.

"Yes," continued the peer, "and I am ashamed to say that my own relations with the persons at whom our suspicions point are of a nature to compromise me seriously, not in regard to this, but to a previous matter, which I fear—and I grieve to say it—has led up to this horrible *denouement*."

The commissioner stared at the earl with surprise, and said, politely,

"Earl, I need not caution so experienced a magistrate and statesman as you against making any disclosures calculated to compromise yourself."

"It is not necessary, Sir Henry," replied the earl, with a grim smile. "The story which I am going to tell you is one which I may well shrink from confiding to any human being, and still less to the ears of those who are engaged in the vindication of justice. It is a personal and family secret; it relates to a transaction, for my part, of which I am profoundly and heartily ashamed. In telling it to you I place in your hands my reputation, my honor, and the peace of mind and happiness of many other persons; but in the interest of justice, at whatever cost to myself, I can no longer keep silence."

The earl leaned his head on his hand, and the two men could see that he was mastering some powerful emotion.

"My lord," said the chief commissioner, "no one could judge more clearly than yourself between the circumstances which would tend to connect you, however remotely, with acts of a criminal character and matters which have become mixed up with such acts, and which, though not of a criminal character, it is disagreeable or even compromising for you to disclose. In the former case we could not ask you to say anything; in the latter we can offer you the assurance that nothing you divulge shall ever pass these walls, or be used except in a manner to shield you from any unpleasantness."

"I expected nothing less of your discretion and good-feeling, Sir Henry, and take it for granted that I may equally rely on that of Mr. Sontag"—the latter bowed—"but I assure you that when I came here I was prepared to do my duty and face the consequences without obtaining any such promise."

Once more the unhappy earl, drinking the cup of repentance to the last dregs, forced himself to tell the story of his errors and of that to which they had led, adding the circumstances which had come to his knowledge through George Barton's son. The two men listened to this remarkable confession with rapt attention. While he spoke the drama gradually assumed form, color, precision in Mr. Sontag's brain, until, as the earl closed his recital, the great detective leaped to his feet and cried out,

"We have them! We have them! It is as clear as noonday. We must have a warrant for their immediate arrest."

The detective was always in the ascendant with Mr. Sontag, who, if he were, as he had said once before, an artist, had no time to waste in sentiment, and in fact seldom wasted it either in that or in sympathy. He was too familiar with the worst weaknesses of humanity to have any high opinion of men, too concentrated on the business of detection and conviction to have much nicety in regard to the feelings of those who were the objects or the means of his skillful and ingenious strategy. His mind, therefore, while the peer was speaking, had been fixed on the aim which he, as Chief of the Detective Department of Police, had in view—the solution of the Regent Circus mystery. The commissioner, on the contrary, who was by nature, of a less philosophic and more chivalrous nature, while he had not lost a word, and was fixing all the facts related by the earl in a singularly tenacious memory, could not help appreciat-

ing and sympathizing with the pain that such a declaration gave to his distinguished visitor.

"Stay, Sontag," he said, speaking in a gentle tone, as he cast a deprecating glance at his subordinate, "will you kindly sit down a moment, and let us ask his lordship, who has laid us under so deep an obligation by this revelation, whether there is any line of action he wishes to suggest—any which occurs to him as the best for insuring the punishment of the crime while avoiding the exposure which his own voluntary reparation has rendered unnecessary? Nay, my lord, forgive me, we owe you this at least for such help as this; for without it our conjectures would have been vain. Besides," he added to Sontag, "you surely have not overlooked the fact that even yet a link is missing? Neither of the Pollards, though they may be the principals in this infamous plot, was the individual who actually prepared the torpedo and placed it on Mr. Barton's person. You have no clew whatever to the intermediate agent or agents of the murder."

"I appreciate your good feeling, Sir Henry," said the earl, offering his hand to the commissioner, "and thank you."

"Yes, but pardon me, my lord, and Mr. Commissioner," said Sontag, with his eye still on the main purpose of his thoughts. "We can at once have them arrested on the charge of forgery, and that will assist us in getting the evidence we require in the murder case."

"No, Mr. Sontag," said the earl. "Forgive me; I can not agree to that. I well understand your anxiety to catch these men—it does you credit as an active and able officer—but you must see, after what I've just told you, that it does not lie with me to accuse or to punish them for their sins against me. The consequences of those personal wrongs I have determined to suffer, without taking any steps to avenge them, because in once allowing myself to take the benefit of the wrong-doing of these men I have made it ten times my own. My object in coming here is not to obtain a personal reparation, it is to prevent two criminals escaping from the penalty due for a blacker and more hideous crime."

Mr. Sontag involuntarily gave a slight elevation of the shoulders which, under any other circumstances, would have cost him an angry look from the earl, who, however, was in no humor to resent any of those mortifications which were the natural and inevitable results of his position. He simply turned to the commissioner and added,

"But you need not let them escape. You must have them closely watched until you can get the clew you want to establish their connection with the crime."

"Oh, that is being done," said the chief detective, dryly. "They will not be allowed to quit the kingdom; but I should certainly prefer to have them between four stone walls, and I say nothing ought to be allowed to prevent us from securing them."

A quick anger shot into the peer's eyes, but he instantly mastered it.

"Mr. Sontag," he said, in a quiet, dignified tone, "I do you the justice to believe that if you were in my position you would act precisely as I am doing. Command all my resources, my time, my

intelligence such as it is—and in the last resort even my reputation —for the ends of justice—anything except to put me forward as seeking to punish the delinquencies of the miserable men who have once been the agents of my own wrongful acts. But, Sir Henry," he said, turning to the commissioner and giving him his hand, "I must not keep you from the urgent business you have in hand, and my daughter is waiting below. Spare no expense. Telegraph to all the ports to prevent any evasion; they will be as clever in their criminality as they have been in their business. Good-night."

He bowed with politeness, but dignity, to Mr Sontag.

"My lord," said the latter, taking a step forward, as his clouded face assumed a brighter expression, touched and refined by some secret feeling, "may I shake hands with you?"

The earl gave his hand cordially but gravely, and accompanied by the commissioner left the room. When his chief returned, he looked at Mr. Sontag with a curious, inquiring glance. The detective appeared to be a little ashamed of his sudden betrayal of feeling.

"The earl," he said, with a slight laugh, which was evidently forced, "is greater in the hour of his deepest humiliation than any man I ever saw in the height of an untarnished integrity."

"You are a queer fellow, Sontag," said the commissioner, smiling. "I see that underneath your philosophic calm and stern officialism you conceal some deep fountains of sentiment—very, very deep down, I fear; but in this case I sympathize with you. It is not often that you and I, with all our experience, get such an insight into such a character as that."

"And it is not often that a bad secret deserves to be so well kept," replied Sontag. "But there is midnight striking, and no word from Garbett. That fellow has a nose like a blood-hound; I believe he really does smell a criminal when he passes him. He saw some fellow to-day in Lincoln's Inn Fields—a certain Captain Yates—gambler, turfman, blackleg, *roué*—everything a man can be that's bad, and still swagger about as a 'gentleman,' ay, and in gentlemen's society, too—who is already in our black-books, and has been signalized to us from France and Belgium as having had some suspicious relations with criminals, though he has hitherto managed to keep on the right side of the hedge."

"What, Yates of the Colorado business?" inquired Sir Henry.

"The very same," replied Sontag. "Well, seeing him to-day in such close proximity to Pollards' offices, an idea struck Garbett, and he asked me to let him go and make some inquiries about this gentleman. He started off at five o'clock, and I have not heard of him since. He must have got hold of something serious, for he never wastes his time."

"I hope he will be more fortunate than poor McLaren."

"Ah! a good man, too, but inclined to be rash. Garbett, like a good general, never moves without protecting his rear. He is well armed. I have no fear of him. But my curiosity will keep until to-morrow morning."

Though Mr. Sontag spoke so confidently, we shall see that, in fact, it did not keep so long even as that.

CHAPTER XX.

TWO BITTER DISAPPOINTMENTS.

At about the same hour that the Earl of Selby was sitting in the cabinet which is the lively center of the discovery and prevention of crime among four millions of people, two men landed in Gravesend from the steam ferry-boat, having crossed from Tilbury. The very name of that place must have awakened in their minds some bitter reflections. They had come down from Bow third-class by the railway. Their garb was that of mechanics returning late from work, which had left many a foul mark on their hands and faces. One, the younger and taller of the two, carried over his shoulder a plaited straw basket, from which protruded the handles of some well-used plumber's tools. Over the right arm of the other was a coil of lead piping of small diameter, and he carried in his left hand a piece of iron gas-pipe about six feet long. Both these men wore old, greasy felt hats pulled well over their faces, and the taller smoked a short clay pipe. The elder of the two had a grisly beard, which looked as if it had been both smoked and singed in the course of his labor. In a bright light it would have been difficult to distinguish their features; in the dinginess of Gravesend gas it was impossible to identify them, as they furtively turned down a street to the left running parallel with the river-bank. Keeping close together, they conversed in low monosyllables or hasty whispers, although there appeared to be no danger of their being overheard by the two or three persons who could be discerned in the street. As the reader will have guessed, the firm of Pollard & Pollard, having decided on a "new departure," was hidden beneath this clever disguise.

The manner in which they had evaded the detectives, who were spying every motion, was creditable to the genius of Mr. Charles Pollard. The two men, at about six o'clock, had driven in a hansom to Mr. Charles's house in Queen's Gate, as if to dine there—and there they dined. They were closely followed by the four detectives, who stationed themselves in front of the house, and, fearing to betray their presence or excite suspicion by perambulating the long paved mews which ran behind the houses facing on Queen's Gate, narrowly watched the only outlet at the end. Each house connected with its own stables. Charles Pollard directed that the brougham should be prepared at eight o'clock; and at the last moment, just before it was about to be pulled out of the coach-house, to be harnessed to the horses, he entered it with his uncle, drew up the wooden blinds with which it was provided, and pulled down the silken ones within, making it impossible for any eye to penetrate the interior. There was no warrant out against them; and even if they were being watched, the police would hardly venture to examine the carriage in leaving the mews. He had taken his coachman aside, and to the surprise of the man slipped a five-pound note into his hand.

"Jeffrey," he said, "you know, of course, that we are trying to

find out what has become of that Mr. Barton, Lord Selby's man of business, who ran away the other day?"

The man who had served the father of his present master nodded, "Yes, sir."

"Well, we have had some important news about him to-day, and we are promised, if we go to a certain place to-night, that we shall find a man who knows where the money and papers are, but doesn't want to be known; and we have to act very cautiously, you know, so that no one shall get wind of it."

The man entered into the spirit of the thing at once.

"I see, sir," he said. "You want to see him, secret-like."

"Just so. But you know Barton ran off with a hundred thousand pounds?"

"A hun-derd-thou-sand pounds, sir?" said Jeffreys, slowly, with eyes that showed how hard it was for his brain to realize the immensity of such a sum. "D'ye say so, sir?"

"Yes; and very clever and cunning folks he had to help him, and it takes all my wit to circumvent them. But we'll do it, Jeffrey, we'll do it yet!"

"Oh, there ain't no doubt about you, sir," said Jeffrey, glancing at his master with some pride. "If any one can do it you will."

"Well, Jeffrey, this man we're going to see to-night, you know, tells us these fellows may suspect we have some news, and it is very likely they're watching us now. Have you seen any suspicious-looking men about?"

"Why, sir," cried Jeffrey, his face clearing with a sudden idea, "Lord James Mulville's coachman were only just a-saying to me, when you called me up, that two fellows looking like bailiffs had been a-loping about the end of the mews for the last hour and a half, and he asked me if I knew of any one in trouble along our row, sir. Mebbe they're the very chaps you mean?"

Charles Pollard's eyelids trembled a moment, but he answered calmly,

"I shouldn't wonder. Anyhow, we must act as if they were. Have the horses harnessed all ready. My uncle and I will get into the brougham in the stable, and pull up the venetians; then no one can see inside. Then you draw out the carriage into the mews, put in the horses as quick as you can, and get on the seat by yourself. Send Tim off somewhere on a message. If those men should ask you any question about where you're going, just say you are taking the brougham for Mrs. Pollard to Victoria Station, then drive like the deuce. Cut across Westminster Bridge, and get down that side of the river to Tooley Street, where you will drop us—we have to meet the man in that neighborhood—and then you come straight home. Now, Jeffrey, this is a very important matter for us; not a word to a soul, and have everything ready in half an hour; and if we catch Barton, I'll see you get part of the reward. D'ye understand?"

"Oh yes, sir, you'll see. I'll manage it," cried Jeffrey; and the maneuver was executed to the letter.

As the carriage passed out of the yard two detectives peered at it sharply, but it was quite impossible to penetrate its secret. They had watched from the end of the mews the operation of putting in

the horses; they had seen the brougham pulled out of the coach-house, and were certain no one had entered it while it stood in the yard. However, as it passed them rapidly, one of them threw up his finger to the coachman and called out,

"Are you Lord Mulville's coachman?"

"No," shouted Jeffrey, shortly, "I'm Mrs. Pollard's. What the devil is that to you?" And giving his horses the whip, he was round the corner in a moment.

The men looked after the carriage with suspicious glances, and that feeling of doubt which is intuitional in a detective. One of them ran round to consult the two coadjutors who were walking on the opposite side of the street in front of Mr. Charles Pollard's house.

"Oh!" said the oldest of the party, "they could hardly be in the carriage; they were out on that balcony smoking only ten minutes ago. Still, it's not a bad idea to follow it up. They may be sending a message to some one, you know. 'Gad! he's gone round the corner already. Run down and take that hansom that's standing at Cromwell Road, and see where coachee goes to."

But from the upper end of Queen's Gate to Cromwell Road is a good long step, and before our detective could reach a hansom the brougham was far down the road, and, turning down to Chelsea by the Metropolitan Station at South Kensington and Pelham Place, had rendered it impossible to the sharpest detective in the world to follow its course.

From Tooley Street the two men had found their way to Mr. Charles Pollard's useful retreat in the East-end, where they assumed two workmen disguises which he had used before, and which were, indeed, almost impenetrable. The bag of tools was already there; but on their way down the Bow Road they had, at Charles's suggestion, gone into a plumber's shop and bought the piping.

Thus they were on their way to join the yacht. When they had shaken themselves free of the people who had crossed in the boat, and proceeded about two hundred yards or so, the younger swung round and cast a sharp glance up the street.

"Any one coming?" said the other, in a voice shaky with anxiety.

"No," replied his companion. "Quick! Down to the left, and then to the right."

And away they went rapidly, the elder panting painfully for breath.

At length the taller one turned down to a row of two-story houses which faced the water, and in front of which a small wooden jetty extended into the river, with a few boats moored alongside it.

"She should be lying out thereabouts," said Charles Pollard, peering eagerly over the water. The night was clear, though there was no moon.

A small vessel or two was moored out in the stream, but no steamer was to be seen, either up or down the river, excepting a large vessel which was slowly steaming up against the tide, and whose huge bulk concealed a large stretch of the river. "He must have moved her down," he muttered. "D—n it, it is vexatious! However, let's go in and get his explanation."

He turned to a small public-house which stood at the corner of the row before-mentioned. Over the door swung a sign on which by daylight could have been made out a rough and somewhat simple caricature of three hogsheads lying on their sides, two below and the third resting on them, forming a pyramid. It was the "Three Tuns," of which a gentleman of the naval name of Rodney professed to be the proprietor. The house was not yet closed, and from within came to the ears of the two fugitives the sharp, exasperating sounds of one of the most diabolical instruments ever invented next to the bagpipes, a concertina, and a hubbub of voices which, from their high pitch, seemed to be habituated to talking amid whistling winds and roaring waves. Avoiding the entrance to the bar, Charles Pollard turned quickly down a small passage, about three feet wide, which lay between the inn and the next house, and knocked at a side door. After a pause of a minute the door was half opened by a stout, red-faced man, with a not very frank or attractive aspect, who, thrusting his large head through the aperture he had made, keenly surveyed the two men. The light from within fell on them clearly, and the elder Pollard shrunk from it and drew behind his partner.

"What do you want?" cried the man, gruffly—he was none other than the host of the Three Tuns.

Charles Pollard whispered a few words to him.

"What!" said the man. "Not possible! Mr. Stanley? Why I shouldn't a-knowed you from Adam. Who is that other fellow?"

"A friend; is the captain here?"

"The captain? Which captain? They're both gone, over two hours ago. But come in, sir—come in. I've got a letter for you. Captain Yates expected you would come, but I didn't know you in that rig."

He made room for them to enter, and shut the door and locked it. They found themselves in a small bar-parlor reeking with the fumes of hot spirits and tobacco. Some one appeared to have been sitting with mine host, for a half-finished glass of hot gin and a long clay pipe, from which the smoke still curled upward, lay on the table, while another long clay was still between the landlord's fingers.

Stepping across the room and closing the door, which led to a passage or room beyond, Charles Pollard turned quickly to the publican, and in a tone the anxiety of which could not be concealed, said,

"You say that Captain Yates has gone?"

"Yes," said the man, peering curiously at the speaker and his companion; "why, sir, what's the meaning of this mummery?"

"Oh, nothing; only a joke I was going to play on him. Of course he'll be back directly—he was to meet me here at eleven; where is the letter?"

"Meet you here at eleven?" said the stout man, laughing till his sides shook. "Well, that is a joke! Why, he's away, sir—sailed in his yacht two hours since—he's nigh Margate by this time, for she goes like a swallow."

"Sailed!" shouted the two men together, in a tone penetrated with such anguish as to strike the ear of the man at once, and reveal to him the depth of their disappointment.

"Steamed—if you like it better," said the man; "gone off, I b'lieve, to Havre. But here's his letter; you can see for yourself."

Charles Pollard, who had dropped the basket on the table, tore open the envelope, which was addressed to "Samuel Stanley, Esquire," and read:

"*Private and confidential.*

"Yacht 'Vera,' Tuesday, 8.30 P.M.

"MY DEAR PAL AND PATRON, AND MOST ESTIMABLE QUACK OF QUARRELS,—Next time you have business of importance with a gentleman of my position and experience you had better keep the appointments he makes with you.

"'O come in life's gay morning,
Ere in thy sunny way
The flowers of hope have withered,
And sorrow ends thy day.'

"I intended this afternoon, if you had done me the honor to come to Clement's Inn, to tell you that I had received from a friend in a certain office not one hundred yards from the Ad—y, information which led me to conclude that the sooner I changed my native air for that of some more genial and remote southern climate, the better for my lungs—and neck. But as you did not choose to come at my call, and the hour you have fixed is inconvenient, I am compelled to take advantage of the tide, which, as you are aware, waits for no man, and get out of the reach of that octopus in S——d Y——d as soon as possible, the more that we have the body of one of his myrmidons on board, which we are anxious to consign to the secrecy of the deep blue sea. I sincerely regret that I am unable to offer you and your friend a passage in the 'Vera.' She is a beautiful boat, and your agreeable company would have greatly enhanced the pleasures of the voyage.

"With regard to the payment of that little balance you owe me, I am disposed to be generous, and hereby grant you a receipt and quittance in full—you see I sign over a 1*d.* stamp—in virtue of the sum you advanced me on account of the purchase-money of this vessel, which I propose henceforth to treat as my own, and of a further sum of £5000—receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged—which I and Captain Sweeny—who is an old pal of mine—have discovered cleverly concealed in a pair of old hunting-boots in the locker under your own private berth. Were it bootless to say that it more than covers all the services I have ever rendered you—and that we will settle accounts next time we meet?

"Ta-ta, my dear Q. Q., and many thanks.

"Yours in the fellowship of saints.

"T. YATES.

"P. S.—By the way, I caught a glimpse to-day in your 'Fields' of the smug phiz of one of Sontag's *mouchards*, named Garbett—and I could swear I saw him hanging about the Three Tuns just as my boat put off. Look out for him, and give him a wide berth. *Adieu!* I send this ashore by one of Rodney's boats. Just off."

Who could paint the feelings of rage, disappointment, terror, and despair with which Charles Pollard read this hideous product of

criminal cynicism? One would imagine that hanging would be almost bliss compared with the furious, sharp-biting agony of such a moment as he then endured. Even through the black upon his face his uncle could see what a terrible commotion was going on within; for his brows were contracted, his eyes seemed starting from his head, his teeth were clinched, and he breathed heavily. The landlord noticed it.

"No bad news, I hope, sir," he said, in a tone which rendered it impossible to tell whether his interest was feigned or sympathetic.

Charles Pollard started, and by a powerful effort managed to articulate,

"No, except that Captain Yates is an infernal villain. Will you give us two hot whiskeys, Rodney—quick?"

The man left the room, and Charles Pollard, the letter grasped convulsively in his hand, dropped on a chair.

"For God's sake, what's the matter?" cried the uncle, in a hoarse whisper.

"Yates has cut with the yacht and the money. Read that."

Fishing out of the pocket of his dirty waistcoat his gold *pince-nez*, which he had not forgotten amid all the excitement of his flight, Joseph Pollard stuck it on his nose, and deliberately began to read. The other, with his hands in his pockets, kept his eyes on the ground, and from the movement of his lips and the jerks of his body it might be guessed that he was internally cursing Mr. Tom Yates with all the minuteness of a Dominican and all the savage intensity of an Arab or a Turk. The elder Pollard's lips were pressed tightly together as he read, but otherwise his face and attitude were calm. The calmness was ominous and menacing. He had just finished his reading when the landlord returned with two steaming jorums of whisky. By a common impulse both the men stretched out their hands and drank off the hot liquid without stopping. In their excitement they were hardly conscious of any sensation.

The landlord stared.

"Two more, Rodney," said Charles Pollard, "in about five minutes. There's a sovereign."

Both were silent for a full minute after he had left the room, each engaged in his own thoughts. The rage that filled their souls crushed out for that brief space all their anxiety about their situation. To have been done by such a scoundrel—the accomplice and chief agent of their crime—plundered, deserted, and, in the very crisis of their peril, deprived of the means of escape they had so craftily provided; to be laughed at and made the butt of his cold, cruel sarcasm in the hour of their deepest humiliation was a punishment indeed, bitter to the taste as apples of Sodom, branding to the spirit as red-hot iron to the flesh. It burned itself in with pain and hissing.

The senior partner in this community of crime had also sunk on a chair, and forgetting his disguise, played with the gold glasses with his wonted air of pompous abstraction when engaged in discussing important matters of business. The figure and attitude would have been ludicrous had they not been so dreadful.

Charles Pollard cast a glance at him sidewise.

"What are we to do?" he said, in a rapid undertone. "That

fellow will be back in a moment. We haven't a minute to lose. You see what he hints at in the postscript?" pointing to the letter clutched in his uncle's hand. "I have about four thousand in the bag, and all that money in Paris. Stay, here he comes; drink it up quick, and let us get outside."

The elder made no reply. He was still fumbling with his glasses and thinking deeply. Rapidly he was passing in review all that he had gained and lost in that life of over threescore years, which had begun so brightly, and which had brought him to this—to be fleeing in a mean disguise from the bloody sword of justice. He was thinking of his wife, who had lived with him in the same house in Regent's Park, every inch of which was familiar to him, for over thirty years, whose hair, like his own, was silvered with age, who within a few hours would learn of his flight and his dishonor, perhaps of his crime. He was thinking of his son, a lieutenant in the Engineers, now serving in India, who had been mentioned in dispatches for brilliant services during the Afghan War; of his daughter, married to a Court physician, a knight; of his younger son at Cambridge, full of promise and ambition, which would to-morrow be extinguished in the pitchy shame of his father's sins. He was thinking of the sturdy old firm of Pollard & Pollard, which had flourished like a mighty tree, with its roots deep in vast estates and rich inheritances, in wealthy corporations and flourishing businesses, and yet whose fame and vigor would to-morrow, at the touch of the Ithuriel spear of Justice, wither, shrink up and rot away, its very name to become a by-word of ignominy.

Silently taking the glass from the landlord's hand, he sipped and mused, while Charles Pollard nervously chattered to the man, and affected to joke at the trick his friend had played him. In two minutes they rose up to go, the landlord letting them out at the door by which they had entered.

"Well," he said, aloud to himself, as he locked the door, "this is a rum go! I b'lieve that chap Stanley is a lawyer, or something of that sort. Looks as if Cap'n Yates owed him some money, and has given him leg-bail. Well, it's none of my business, howsomever; so long as they all pay their shot, they may come and go as much as they please; but I never saw a better mummery, no, not in a theayter. You couldn't have told them two from plumbers till they began to speak."

"What's that you say?" said a man, entering from the other room and sitting down beside the grog and pipe he had left when the knock came to the door.

* * * * * * *

Charles Pollard, shouldering his bag, which was pretty heavy, led the way slowly along the river-bank in front of the houses before referred to, his uncle following, with bowed head, mechanically, walking as in a dream. There were some small wharfs and timber-yards in this direction, and after tramping in silence for nearly a quarter of an hour, having diverged inland to avoid them, they returned and continued to walk alongside the dark, glistening river. The public-houses were emptying, and they met little knots of wrangling or stolid creatures staggering to such places as each called home. The two mean-looking men who passed them carried

enough gold to have made them all rich for a year, and yet themselves had no fixed destination—still less a home. That word for them was dead and meaningless forever.

At length they had passed beyond houses, except where the dark outline of a cottage or outbuilding rose up here and there, and presently their feet were on grass. They had passed a shed close to the river, apparently a boat-shed, when Charles Pollard suddenly stopped.

"Hark!" he said. "Did you hear steps?"

"No," said the senior partner, in a sullen tone. "What if there were?"

The junior listened again. The night was clear and starlit. The great river moved on black but gleaming, with here and there lights twinkling on its bosom. They were on a slight elevation. Looking back, they could see the lights of Gravesend, across the stream those of Tilbury. The deep, monotonous throbbing of a steamer coming up the river, and its own soft, incessant murmur as it ran to the sea, alone broke the silence.

"Where are you going?" said the elder, in a strange, muffled voice, as he threw down the piping with a thud on the grass.

"On," replied Charles Pollard, gloomily, making as if he would go forward. "On; we must not stay in Gravesend. Let us get to Dartford. Our only chance now is to go to Folkestone, and straight on to Spain. We must stop and ask our way when we get on a little further."

"Stop, Charlie," replied Joseph Pollard, "I'm not going any further."

He had suddenly awakened from his walking dream. His mind was clear again. His voice was calm and determined.

"Not going any further!" cried Charles Pollard, vainly trying to make out in the darkness the features of his uncle, which had been so carefully blurred by lamp-black. "What do you mean to do?"

"Charlie," said the old man, "I've had enough of this; I can't stand it any longer. There is no use fighting against fate; we have made our bed, and we must lie in it. I am going back to give myself up—you may run away if you like—I won't go another step!"

"What!" shouted Charles Pollard, in a voice of mingled rage and terror. "Give yourself up, Uncle Joe! Are you crazy? Why, you will swing at the end of a rope in Newgate, and I too! How am I to get off, I should like to know, if you go and confess everything? No, no, you sha'n't do that!"

"I will," said the elder, in a deep, determined tone. "My mind's made up; so good-by, Charlie—God help you—and me too! we've made a sad mess of it;" and a hollow groan escaped from his chest. He held out his hand.

"Nonsense," said Charles Pollard; "don't waste time here; every minute is valuable. Come along; we shall manage it yet."

"Very well, Charlie, if you won't shake hands I must go without. Good-bye, I say;" and he turned and took a step or two.

Charles Pollard was in front of him in an instant.

"Turn back, old man—turn back!" he said, fiercely. "You shall not go back."

"I will!" said Joseph Pollard, all his savage doggedness coming up. "Stand out of my way, I say, and go yours." He tried to pass.

"You shall not," said Charles Pollard, in a low, determined tone, as he placed himself once more in front of the other and seized him by the arm. The uncle, still a powerful man, struggled to free himself.

"Leave go, sir." He dealt his junior partner a blow with his fist which made him stagger. The latter dropped his bag, stepped back a pace, and quickly putting his hand in his bosom, brought it out again. "Stand aside, Charles Pollard!"

"I won't. Are you determined to go back?"

"Yes;" he moved forward. At the same moment Charles Pollard's hand stretched out—at the same moment something in his hand touched the old man's breast—at the same moment there was a flash and a report, and with a low groan Joseph Pollard sunk to the earth. And it almost seemed to Mr. Charles to be at the same moment that he heard a sound as of something brushing over the grass behind him, felt a cold muzzle pressed to his ear, and heard the voice of Mr. Garbett say, quietly, rapidly,

"Don't stir; drop your pistol, or I shoot. I arrest you in the queen's name!"

But Garbett had not calculated on the desperate daring, or rather resolution, of Charles Pollard driven to bay. The detective, holding his revolver with his left hand and standing behind his prisoner, had seized with his right hand the latter's arm. The grip was firm; but Charles Pollard shook it off, and cocking his revolver, was in the act of turning on his assailant, when the trigger of Garbett's pistol fell, and the junior partner involuntarily joined the senior on a longer journey than they had contemplated. They had been partners in business and in crime, and in death they were not divided.

* * * * * * *

In the middle of the night, or rather when day was beginning to lighten the hemisphere, Mr. Sontag was roused out of a slumber which appeared to be undisturbed by the immense variety of frightful facts and painful secrets of which his brain was the pantechnicon. His attendant, who, like a doctor's servant, was accustomed to these nocturnal alarums, entered, and told him that Garbett was waiting without and anxious to see him immediately.

"Come in, Garbett," shouted the detective, sweeping his brain clear in a moment of all the clouds of sleep. "Turn on the gas, Martin, and leave us."

"What time is it, Garbett?"

"Three-fifteen, sir; just arrived from Gravesend. I posted."

"Gravesend? Why, what's the matter? you look as white as a sheet."

The detective was standing in exactly the same position as we have before described, his head on one side, his eyes motionless, his hands crossed in front holding his hat. But his hair was in disorder, his under jaw seemed limp, and inclined to drop away from his face; under his eyes there appeared to be two dark bags; his face was, indeed, altogether ghastly.

"Bad news, sir!"

"Bad news? Why—what—have the Pollards got off? If they have—"

"'Xcuse me, sir, they've gone to the devil—both dead."

"The devil they have!" cried Mr. Sontag, sitting up in his bed and gazing at Garbett. "You don't mean to say they are dead—not both of them?"

"Both, sir."

"Suicide?"

"One was a murder—the other—accident."

"At Gravesend?" The detective nodded. "What were they doing there?"

"They were going to run away—in a yacht, sir, with Captain Yates."

Mr. Sontag gave a long whistle, threw off the clothes, and thrust his legs out of bed, sitting now on the edge of it, facing his man.

"Here's a letter, sir, I found in the hand of Mr. Joseph Pollard, the old man, after his death."

The chief detective took the letter and ran his eye over it. His quick intelligence appreciated the entire situation in a moment. He burst out with a hearty laugh, while Garbett, who was in no laughing humor, stared at him with a kind of wooden surprise.

"Well," said Mr. Sontag, "for cool, clever, audacious cynicism this beats anything I ever read. I wouldn't have missed this for a hundred pounds. I don't wonder at any one cutting his throat after receiving such a letter as that. I think I should myself."

"He didn't cut his throat, sir. Charles Pollard shot Joseph Pollard before my eyes—to prevent his peaching; and while I was trying to arrest Charles I shot him—by accident, sir; but if I hadn't he would have shot me."

"Oh Lord, Garbett!" cried Mr. Sontag, getting up and walking about the room in great agitation. "What a mess you have made of it! Why, man, we have secret information to-night which satisfies us they were the instigators of Barton's murder, and there was such a nice little job for us to make up the missing links! You see this fellow Yates is one of the accomplices. Is he off?"

"Yes, sir."

"That yacht must be caught. We will telegraph at once all along the Channel. But, oh, Garbett, Garbett, this is a terrible disappointment; it was a beautiful case—a beautiful case!" He walked up and down in his bare feet, with his head down, shaking his head and repeating—"All our labor lost—such a splendid case too!'

He then questioned Garbett closely, but rapidly, as to his proceedings after leaving on his afternoon's expedition. How the two fugitives had managed to elude the vigilance of the four detectives put on their track—two to each partner—was of course as yet unknown to either of the officers.

Garbett, it appeared, had disguised himself and gone forth to look up Yates in certain haunts of his which had become known to the police, in connection with the inquiry into the affair at the Melton Club. He soon discovered that the captain had not changed his quarters—which, with a judicious boldness, he had for some years maintained, at least ostensibly, in Duke Street, St. James's. At

half past six he had seen him enter those quarters, whence in about twenty minutes a boy had issued and summoned a hansom, into which the captain, clad in a blue yachting costume and carrying a small traveling-bag, had entered with the boy and driven to Fenchurch Street. At Gravesend he had gone to the Three Tuns, and remained there until a gig came off from a fine steam-yacht lying in mid-stream, which forthwith conveyed him on board, followed soon after by a boat of Rodney's. This boat came back; the yacht raised anchor and steamed away, leaving Mr. Garbett to his reflections.

Turning into the public-house with the view of making some inquiries, he had struck up an acquaintance with mine host, and was gradually sounding his way amid the mud-banks of that worthy person's mind, when two men knocked at the door, and he was asked to wait in the next room. He had not been able to see them or to overhear their conversation, but on returning to the room he had caught a few words about the cleverness of their disguise, which immediately put all his detective faculties on the alert, and he had set off to follow the men, still with hardly more than a faint suspicion of their identity, for he did not believe it possible that they could have eluded the sharp watch he had put upon their movements. It was only when crouching under the side of the small shed we have mentioned that he caught and recognized the sound of their voices in the silence of the night, and dimly distinguished their movements. Cocking his revolver, he had resolved to rush forward and offer the old man an opportunity of giving himself up at once, when the flash and report settled the dispute, and then ensued the fatal result which grieved Mr. Sontag as much as if he had lost a large inheritance.

"Well," said Mr. Sontag, with a deep sigh--"well, there is no use crying over spilt milk. The most we can do now is to catch the subordinates;" he had been dressing while he spoke. "We will go across and telegraph to all the French and English ports at once. We can leave the transatlantic till to-morrow; and mind, Garbett, we must keep this quiet for twenty-four hours. Where are the bodies—at Gravesend? Good. We will get the inquest postponed till Friday. Come along. There is no rest for the wicked. But—what a pity! what a pity! It was a beautiful case!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A NOBLE LOVE.

Overcome by the fatigue and excitement of two days of penitential passion, the earl slept better after his final act of repentance than he had for many a week. The wrong done to his sister, the Countess of Tilbury, had been fully repaired so far as material interests were involved, though the breach of faith stood unconfessed, as it was still unknown, to her. How far a man can be said to have performed an ample penance in such circumstances is a matter we must leave to those troublesome dealers in conundrums, the casuists. These secret reparations, made without disclosure to the person wronged, without submitting to the humiliation and unpleasantness

of a personal confession, without receiving the seal of personal forgiveness, are common enough, as the columns of the "Times" and the accounts of the Chancellor of the Exchequer used weekly to show, when superstition had a stronger hold on people than it appears to do now, for the number of bank-notes acknowledged to have been received by that official on account of unpaid income-tax has largely diminished. Clearly it is nobler, as it certainly is more salutary, for a man to stand up and take the full penalty of his sin than to avoid its most painful consequences by concealing from the injured person the nature of the wrong or the personality of the wrong-doer; but, on the other hand, there was much force in the peer's own argument that to have had a frank explanation with his sister would have given her more pain than either comfort or profit, and have overshadowed the relations between them for the few short years of life which were left to them. We do not undertake to pass any judgment on the question, leaving the character of the Earl of Selby to be estimated by every one according to his or her own lights. Enough to state the facts. We have seen, too, that his only confidants, both very fresh and very young casuists, it is true, appeared to concur in his view of this knotty point of conscience.

But when, on Wednesday morning, the earl's eyes, refreshed by slumber, opened on the light of a new day, the relief which his conscience had experienced from the drastic remedy he had administered to it the night before, was to some extent counteracted by the entirely different anxieties arising out of Lady Blanche's confession. His pride was deeply wounded, the cherished hopes of many years were rudely blasted, and all owing to the awkward perversity of young love. George Barton was essentially everything that even such a judge and critic as the earl could have desired the man to be who should wed his daughter; but the accidents of rank, race, and fortune were wanting, and left the ambition of the haughty nobleman all unsatisfied. What would the world think of such a match? What would not be the disappointment of Lord Tilbury, the grief of his mother?

Rapidly, excitedly, sometimes angrily, the earl's mind worked, while he was dressing, at this disagreeable subject. His candor obliged him to admit that Barton's behavior had been irreproachable. He even went further, and thought that it implied the possession of qualities which served to complete the roundness of a great and perfect character. When he turned to his daughter, whose act had evoked the fatal complication, he saw in it so much that was generous, noble, frank, and pure, so much resembling his own impulsive chivalrousness of disposition, that he could not help admiring and sympathizing, while he fumed and fretted over the consequences. Then he asked himself whether this was not another of the humiliations which fate had prescribed by way of tonic for his errors; for it was clear that but for them the situation would never have arisen. And now, how was he to act? He owed young Barton much, but he estimated that the services could have been fully paid with far less than this. As for Blanche, what could he say or do after that scene of the night before? She had conquered him, she had opened her heart to him, she had opened his and gazed into its secret depths as no human being had ever done—not even his

wife—with all the forcible insight of a clever and loving woman. Lady Blanche had shown him, too, that, great as was her affection for him, she had developed into a character of powerful individuality. She would be and do all that a daughter, loving, sympathizing, sacrificing, ought to be and do; but she would not yield one jot of her prerogative as a woman. Her hand and heart must go together whenever they were given; otherwise, as her words showed, they would not be given at all. Barton should woo her only with her father's permission, but she let her father understand that, even with such a permission, the citadel of her heart was closed and defended to every other. He was keen enough to foresee all which was implied in that. It was owing to just such a spirit, to just such a determination, that his own married happiness had been secured, in spite of endless intrigues and the imperative orders of his late wife's parents. Had not happiness come to that forbidden contract? Yes; but then his wife had only rejected one Earl of Selby to accept another, and Lady Blanche was throwing over half the peerage for Mr. Barton.

Lady Blanche, although her cheeks indicated that she had not slept well, and the languor of her manner plainly showed how emotion had been preying upon a young, elastic system, was quite as self-possessed as her father when they met at the breakfast-table. There was a certain emphasis in her touch of his hand, in the kiss she imprinted on his cheek; but only he appreciated it. Lord Charles was an observant young gentleman, and on the alert that morning, after the curious night promenade of which he had received as yet no explanation, but he could not detect anything extraordinary in the manner of his father or his sister. They talked about the letters which had come in, chatted with Mrs. Barton, laid out plans for the day, and the earl glanced over the papers, but no reference was made to the subject concerning which the young lord's curiosity was keenly alive. The earl, however, who without seeming to do so read him like a book, at length said, quite simply,

"We abandoned you last night, Charlie. I went to make some inquiries at Scotland Yard, and Blanche must needs take the air in a hansom to keep me company."

Lord Charles perfectly understood that he was to accept this as a complete explanation, and did so for the time, hoping that his sister would be more explicit by and by.

The peer, of course, was ignorant of that tragic solution of all his difficulties which the two Pollards and Mr. Garbett had arranged between them; but the morbid effects of guilt and fear were to a great extent removed, and his mind was all the freer to canvass that other trouble which had suddenly sprung up in his path. His diplomatic finesse was completely baffled in the effort to find a way round that impediment; but he resolved that he would go over and see Lord Tilbury, and try to ascertain how his feelings lay; for already he had gone so far in his determinations as to have settled that, unless the young peer evinced a clear resolution to win his cousin's hand, Lady Blanche should have two years to ponder the important question of her fate, with full liberty of intercourse with Barton, but with the understanding that neither of the young people should come to any fixed arrangement, or permit the state of

their feelings to be revealed to others. Later on in the day he would speak to Lord Charles, and make him the confidant of this species of secret family compact. He did not hide from himself that there was very little hope of improving the position by this concession, but it was a kind and a proper one—and in two years no one knew what might happen. Besides, he felt it was due to his paternal dignity that he should not appear to have been forced into a submission which was repugnant to his pride.

He walked across the park, and found the Countess of Tilbury joyous and relieved. The young peer was recovering rapidly, spite of the acute disappointment he had experienced the day before. She was rather surprised at the calmness which had ensued upon it, and began to think that his feelings had not been so profound on the point as she had imagined.

The Earl of Selby promptly broached the subject which was occupying his thoughts ,and soon learned all that had taken place on the previous day. His face clouded; that of the countess was troubled and puzzled.

"I can not understand it," she said. "For reasons which I may not even hint to you, I had a conviction that things would be arranged. I know she did not feel any romantic affection for him, but I did hope that in time her feelings would become warmer and more decided—and the match was so fit. About this I have no doubt—he loves her as a man loves only once in a life-time; and it grieves my very soul to think that he should have to suffer, as he will suffer, by her indifference."

"Have you not guessed the reason?"

"I can't say that I have. I can not understand her. It appears to be a whim to me—who know a good deal you can never know," said the countess.

"She loves another man," said the earl.

"What!" cried the countess, perfectly thunderstruck, and utterly unable to reconcile such a statement with Lady Blanche's conduct of no longer ago than Monday. "Impossible, my dear earl—impossible!"

The countess's tongue was endeavoring to beat down by emphatic reiteration a vague alarm that floated in her brain. She remembered the incident of yesterday, the tiff about Barton—but that was too insane an idea to nourish.

"Impossible," she cried again, "from what I know!"

"True, nevertheless; she confessed it to me last night," said the earl.

"Why, she must be crazy, my dear brother!" cried the countess, inanely.

The peer shook his head with a troubled smile.

"I am afraid not," he said. "If she were, there might be some hope of curing the malady. Oh no. Her wits are as clear as ever they were."

"Do you know who it is?"

"Yes; it is young Barton."

The earl spoke with perfect calmness, but the countess started and seized his arm, staring at him with an expression almost reaching the sublime of horror. She was as astonished at the calmness of

his tone and manner in making the dreadful announcement as at the fact itself.

"Oh," she said at length, "you are joking, my lord, or you would never speak of it so coolly as that."

"My dear Dora, I never was more serious in my life—nor she either, I am sorry to say. And, what is more, Barton knows of it—and returns it—as you may well suppose."

"It is absolutely incredible and incomprehensible!" said the countess, delivering herself of the polysyllables in long-drawn accents. She clasped her hands together, and looked at the earl with a face full of struggling doubt and confusion of mind. If surprise be an element of art, this stroke of Lady Blanche's was in that respect supreme.

"Oh, what ought I to do?" said the countess. "I have told you there are reasons, known only to me, why I can not believe this. I can not accept it as possible. I can not reconcile it with any notion of Blanche's truthfulness or candor or common sense! And yet I promised her faithfully I would not tell a word to any one about it. Heaven help me—what ought I to do?"

The earl was surprised at this exhibition of feeling on the part of his sister, which he saw was based on some solid grounds of information.

"What is the nature of this secret?" he inquired.

"Why, it related to this very question—the state of her heart, the disposal of her hand. She discussed it with me no later than Monday."

"Is it inconsistent with her confession to me—her acknowledgment to George Barton that she loves him?"

"To my mind, quite," said the countess, who spoke candidly, though in fact her deduction was wrong.

"You must be mistaken, my dear Dora," said the earl. "Blanche is too clear-headed, too brave and straightforward, to have said anything inconsistent with the exact truth. I seem to be surrounded by mysteries just now. I can not guess at the nature of the declaration of which you make so tremendous a secret. I only know his: whatever she thought or said on Monday, she knows now that she loves George Barton, or she would not have said so under circumstances which gave a peculiar solemnity to her confession of it both to him and to me."

"Why, this is truly dreadful!" cried the countess—dismay, shock, surprise, grief, all combined in tone and look.

Appreciation of a certain extravagance in this exclamation, and the accidents thereof, kindled into momentary sparkle the peer's fine sense of humor, as a breath of wind wakes up the smothered glow of a burning "spoil-bank" at the mouth of a coal-pit—a sudden gleam of light amid the blackness. He gave a little laugh.

"Is it so very tragic after all?" he said, slyly. "It is romantic, if you like, but our family has a tendency to that sort of thing."

"Not ours, William! I fear it was imported. Blanche sometimes is very—very—Frenchy—don't you think?"

There was a dangerous glow in the earl's gray eyes, but he said, dryly.

"Like her mother, you mean? I thought you were very strong

on your Norman descent, Dora. Didn't the great William and his filibusters come from France?"

"Oh! but you know," replied the countess, flushing, "that is different; they were Norsemen."

"How do you know? What have you been dipping into—Green, Freeman, Nicholas? I rather think our family sprung from Anjou. And have you any special and precise information that they were not pure Gauls or Celts?"

"Don't tease," said the countess. "I never trouble myself about those questions; we are Normans."

"So was Marie; but with the nameless charm which France seems to lend to its rudest stock, which, in this rough country, we have managed through generations to lose, if we have acquired sterner and nobler qualities. Touch not that subject, Dora. You can not mean to, but you do jar a harsh chord in my heart. She—was perfect." He sighed. "I wish she were here now!"

The countess put her fine-shaped hand caressingly on the back of his, and said, with feminine inconsequentiality,

"At all events he has no Norman ancestry to boast of."

"What—Barton? Clearly Norman. I guess, with a little trouble, I shall be able to get a herald's certificate that his ancestor 'came over with the Conqueror.' There is no difficulty there. We can soon arrange that."

He smiled somewhat maliciously.

"You are in a tiresome humor," retorted the countess, changing the ground again. "The son of your bailiff!"

She expected to see him wince under this little prick of the feminine bodkin, but, to her surprise, he showed no consciousness. He took it seriously. It really seemed as if he were anxious to encounter this first trial of his pride and conquer it. Those small cuticular perforations were like cupping to a lumbago—a sort of irritating distraction of the pain.

"Yes, but the son of an honest, an honorable, a most worthy father, and such a son as any noble of the land might be proud to own, if—"

"Oh, well," cried the countess, impatiently, with a toss of the head, "of course, if you have settled the matter in your own mind, there is no use—"

"But I haven't, my dear Dora! This is just it. I never was more annoyed or worried in my life. It is precisely the most superficially inappropriate and least essentially improper combination that I ever had to pass opinion on. She is a splendid girl; he is a noble, able, high-spirited fellow; he has rendered me great services; he is destined to a brilliant career; that career I can assure him; but, as you hint, he is a plebeian. No use trying to gild that farthing and pass it for a sovereign. It's a 'browny,' though the mintage is quite as good as any other."

"Oh! you are becoming quite a Republican."

"No," said the earl, lightly, "I am only speaking as a naturalist—perhaps I should say numismatist—but you know that there are copper coins worth many golden eagles."

"Yes—old coins."

"And he is new, eh? Very good! I abandon numismatology

and metaphor. But seriously—I have told you of the danger. What is to be done?"

"Put your foot on it at once; it is out of the question."

"Are you sure of Edward's heart? Is there no doubt about his feelings?" inquired the earl, his manner becoming more grave and anxious than it had been during his mischievous sparring with his sister.

"None; he loves her—madly."

The countess selected the hottest adverb she had at hand, but availed herself of it with a sense of its exaggeration; so she added,

"At least I mean profoundly."

"H'm!" said the earl, and, after a pause, looking now keenly at his sister, "Will he work for it—sacrifice for it—press it with all his might and main—make it the sole business of his life for two years?"

"For ten, I am convinced. As for sacrifice, he will do anything for her."

There was a singular fatality in this expression of the countess's, which she employed with one clear meaning, yet which was susceptible of two.

"I must see him," said the earl, musingly.

"You must; but say very little. He can not bear much yet, though he has picked up wonderfully. But, you ought to know, he has taken a queer fancy into his head. I don't understand it. He wants to see—that young person, you know."

The peer was amused at the pettiness of the countess's malice against the troublesome youth.

"You mean George Barton?" he said, with the most innocent air in the world.

"Yes, you know I do. When Blanche was here Edward begged her to send the young man to see him to-day."

The earl looked thoughtful, but he said,

"Oh, he always liked Barton—a mere kindly wish, I suspect."

"I don't think so. From his manner, I judge Edward has some design in his head. You know he is going to sell off his stud?"

"Nonsense! A conversion? Has Lord McCorquodale been praying with him?"

"You are incorrigible," said the countess.

"At all events he can not wish to speak to him about Blanche, my dear Dora, and that is the subject in hand. I had better see Tilbury myself. My idea is to ask if he is prepared to serve, like Jacob, for my Rachel, for two years, with the difference that his reward is to be the girl's love—if he can win it; if not, then I suppose we must let it take its natural course Bartonwise. However deep our disappointment may be, I feel unable to undertake to stand out against Blanche's resolution."

"Well," cried the poor countess, astonished, puzzled, vexed, "I really do not know what has come over everybody. Blanche is a mystery, Edward seems a changed spirit, and as for you—"

"I'm a predestinarian!" interrupted the earl, putting his arm through his sister's as they moved toward the door. "But seriously, Dora, I have become, or am becoming, a very different

man. I am thinking of indulging in the luxury of doing a few good acts before I die—which may not be long now."

The countess looked at him gravely, but said nothing. His tone had touched her heart.

When she had seen him seated at Lord Tilbury's bedside, she made an excuse for leaving them together. After a few questions and answers about his nephew's health, the senior earl came immediately to the subject, and broached it in no light tone.

"You have had a severe shake, Tilbury, and it must have made you serious. Thank Heaven, you seem to be out of danger. We must think now about your settling down to married life. How do matters stand between you and Blanche?"

"She will never be mine," replied the young earl, with a sigh, "but I wish to insure her happiness, and I am glad you have touched upon the subject, as I intended to have spoken to you about it."

"Your mother whispered to me something about a disappointment; but, my dear Edward, you know—'faint heart'—you must not give it up without an effort."

"Ah," replied the young man, shaking his head, "it is not a faint heart that troubles me. My resolution is strong enough, if there were only a shadow of hope; but there is none. Her heart is already occupied, and with her I know what that means. I should never think of trying to turn out the man in possession—holding the indefeasible title of love. No, no. I have too deep an affection for her to desire anything but her complete happiness."

"Why," said Lord Selby, surprised, "how do you know?"

"By intuition, my dear uncle—the intuition of a rival. Have I not loved Blanche for years? Have I not watched her with all the fondness and keenness of a first affection? Have I not noted every movement of her heart—every hint given by her lip, her eye, her cheek? She hardly knew herself, as well as I did, where her antipathies and predilections lay. She was always cool, disinterested, unmoved except when one was near her or speaking with her, and of late that was not often. The indications were so slight that they escaped every eye but mine, which had the clairvoyance of suspicion—of jealousy, if you like—though, God knows, without any of its malice, for the man himself is worthy, if his position and fortune are nothing to yours or mine. She loves George Barton—you may take my word for it."

"You have detected that?" cried the earl. "Have you had no hint?"

"None. It was enough for me to see her face when his name was mentioned only yesterday, after she had let me know, with infinite grace and delicacy, that my own case was hopeless."

"It is true," said the earl. "She admitted as much to me no later than last night."

"I knew it," said young Tilbury, drawing a deep breath; "and she must not be crossed. Such a girl as Blanche is must have her own way. You must not oppose it, my lord."

"Astounding!" cried the Earl of Selby. "I came here for the express purpose of encouraging you to press your suit. My idea was to put off a decision for two years."

"You may put it off for twenty with those two," said young Tilbury; "it will make no difference. No, my dear uncle, let me suggest something better than that. I have thought it all out. You know that ever since I understood the matter—forgive me for alluding to so delicate a subject—I have never been satisfied that so much of my grandfather's property which ought to have gone to you and yours should be coming to me, who have already more than I know what to do with."

"Say no more about that, Tilbury," said the earl, in a choking voice. "I have never given it a regret."

"You? I know that, but I have; and I am uncomfortable about it. Now, here I am—Blanche's cousin—loving her with all my heart and soul, but unable to get her to accept me and mine. At least I can show her a cousin's—a brother's affection, if you will—and, in order to smooth the way to the accomplishment of her heart's desires, I intend at once to instruct my solicitors to draw up a legal renunciation of all my rights of succession to the property coming from my grandfather Selby after my mother's death in Blanche's favor. Justice will be done; it is no more than justice. I shall lose nothing worth speaking of, and she will then be able to marry any one she likes."

The Earl of Selby stared at the young man—moved, admiring, and then shook his head.

"We will not discuss it, my dear boy; it is impossible for me to assent to it. Besides, ill as you now are, any disposition you might make would be nugatory. Indeed, you could do nothing more likely to defeat your own object. Whatever we may think of George Barton, we must do him the justice to believe that he would never consent to wed such a fortune as that until he could show some adequate counterpoise to it. You would postpone the wedding until he were chief-justice or prime-minister."

The young earl was struck by this argument.

"You are right," he said, musing, "I had not thought of that. No, it could not be done now; but it might be understood between you and me, and could be carried out afterward. I hoped I should be able to persuade Barton to agree to it, but I think you are right. It is better not to mention it at present, though my resolution is unchanged. There is one thing, however, we can do: we can assure him every chance of getting on. We can launch him into political life with a strong backing. He is fit for anything, and will soon make his position. Will you promise to do that? Will you give your consent at once?"

The Earl of Selby looked thoughtful; his eye rested kindly and regretfully on the fine, earnest, pallid face before him. This noble sacrifice—sacrifice in a different sense from that conceived of by the countess—enhanced the value of that which he was to lose in Tilbury's abandonment. Pure indeed, and high and holy, was a love which could act with a generosity so chivalrous and noble, and which sprung from the fine undersoil of a nature whose better qualities had hitherto been concealed under a mask of youthful cynicism, frivolity, gayety, irony of tone and manner.

"I have never liked you better than at this moment, Ned," said the Earl of Selby, taking Tilbury's white hand in his own. "But I

can not consent at once. Believe me, my reasons are sound, and I think judicious. The circumstances are very peculiar. I happen to know them all, but I can not explain them to you. It is only just to Blanche that she should have time to reflect on the matter, and we must give Barton an opportunity of showing that he is worthy of so high a prize. I have been able within the past few days, in the complications arising out of that frightful calamity, to observe and gauge his qualities, and I quite agree with you, they are exceptionally high."

The countess entered the room.

"I can not stay any longer," she said to her brother. "*Faiblesse oblige*— Well?" She glanced with anxious inquiry toward Lord Tilbury.

"Mother," he said, taking her hand, "we have agreed upon what is best and right. I renounce a hopeless pursuit. There is a better man in the field—every way a noble fellow, though he is not of noble blood. Blanche loves him. You must help us to carry it through. I love her too much to stand in the light of her happiness even for an hour. I am George Barton's, heart and soul, because he is hers."

The countess was overcome by her son's attitude in this sublime trial. She hid her face in her handkerchief; there was silence for a minute, the Earl of Selby gnawing his under lip, young Tilbury smiling at them. His agony was over.

"Well," said the countess at length, looking up, "I confess I am surprised. I thought I knew you both as well as I knew myself. But you have developed—both of you—you especially, William—qualities I never suspected you of possessing. I thought your romancing days were over, and that nothing short of dynamite would have turned out the soft side of your heart."

"That is precisely what has done it!" said the Earl of Selby, significantly.

"You mean the suddenness of this shock?" she said, gazing at him with a puzzled expression. "Well, I can not, for the honor of a Selby, allow you two to outdo me in generosity. Next to you, dear Ned, Blanche is my dearest child. Whatever you agree upon to make her happy, I shall join in with hand and heart."

They all stretched out their hands, and formed a little loving circle there, pledged to insure the happiness of Lady Blanche.

The countess suddenly remembered something.

"Can you tell me," she said to her brother, "what Mr. Barton wished to see me about when he called on Monday? It was surely not this."

The earl started. His rapid talent helped him.

"I believe he wished to get some information from you which he thought might have assisted him in clearing up the relations existing between his father and the Pollards. But he obtained it from me. I am sorry to say, Dora, you and Ned here will have to change your solicitors. There are some very heavy charges floating over the heads of those men, but I have taken care to protect and secure your interests."

Thus Barton was relieved from an awkward explanation with the good lady, and the earl was free.

CHAPTER XXII.

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT.

THE hapless mortal battling with specters of enemies that are dead and ghosts of misfortunes which are imaginary, while behind him—unknown, unseen, unsuspected—blessed realities of love and hope are standing smiling, only waiting to catch and delight his eyes, is one of the most dismal types of human fate. The time and energy and passion we waste in combating shadows of evil we ourselves conjure up, or of perils whose substance has vanished!

Such a mortal, such a picture of human fatality, was George Barton on the morning after the events which culminated in Mr. Sontag's tragic disappointment, and at the very time when the winged hours were bearing in upon his destiny such various and lucky changes. There he was pacing his room, deep in thought, agitated, sweet mingling with bitter, cloud chasing sunshine, melody running through discord. The two horns of the dilemma between which his mind and heart vacillated were still defined before him more clearly than ever—the one black, ugly, terrible; the other fair, white, polished as ivory, and wreathed with flowers. As one or the other showed its outlines to the eye of the mind, his face wore gloom or sunshine. In the window his birds flung out their melody in joyous trills and agonies of sound, and every now and then, looking up at them with a smile, his heart seemed lightened with a vague hope. Then he would take out of his bosom that little white token, with Her monogram in the corner trying to divine what secret message of comfort it was intended to convey to him, distracted between the impulses of love and the commands of duty. How was it possible to reconcile these in his case? He had been hoping against hope—and against judgment too—that in some way the punishment of the Pollards' crime might be secured without dragging the earl's secret out to the light, exposing it to the eyes of malignant gossips and malicious partisans. But how could that possibly be avoided if the Pollards were driven to bay charged with a crime that involved their lives? He recalled having once been present at the Old Bailey when an eminent counsel was defending a man whose criminality was hideous and flagrant, and he had watched the efforts of an acute mind, subtle in resource, replete with legal lore, unsparing in the use of its weapons, as it strove, step by step, to distort the obvious truth, to disturb the equanimity of the judge, to confuse the senses of the jury, to abuse and discredit the witnesses, and all to win the questionable honor of gaining what seemed to be a hopeless case; and thinking of the Earl of Selby obliged to face such a counsel in the witness-box, instructed by such a firm as the Pollards', with every resource of money and of unprincipled legal skill, his heart shrunk within him at the very idea of forcing Blanche's father to endure such an ordeal. He asked himself how she would regard the man who should become, however innocently and unwillingly, the instrument of divulging that shameful business to all the world? Yet he must do it or write himself

down a craven son. And he felt that the hour was come for casting the fatal die. Then, indeed, his anguish grew keen and fearful. But he had engaged with the earl not to act without notice to him. With a trembling hand, and only after a long agony of reflection, he took up his hat, and placing it on a burning brow, resolved to go forth and demand from Blanche's father that perfect freedom of action which, as his soul was conscious, involved the sacrifice of his love.

But before he went to Portman Square he would fulfill his promise to Lady Blanche to call and see the young Earl of Tilbury.

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Lady Blanche, scenting inquisitiveness in Lord Charles's manner, had dexterously maneuvered to escape being alone with him by keeping Mrs. Barton near her after breakfast, and then retiring with her to what may be termed the women's quarters in Portman Square. Thus she avoided any explanation. Lord Charles, having some letters to write for his father, and all the French and English journals to glance through in the pursuit of that political knowledge which it was his ambition to attain, shut himself up in the library, where the lunch-bell surprised him long before he thought the hour had come. Almost at the same moment Colston announced George Barton, who had walked across the Park after his interview with the young Earl of Tilbury. The countess, at her brother's earnest request, had driven over in a phaeton to see Mrs. Barton, and join the party at lunch. Deeply, indeed, was the heart of the grand dame touched when she met her old friend looking so altered and grief-stricken. They had been together for half an hour, when the tocsin that stirs up all the famishing, revolutionary, and predatory elements of the inner man quite as vividly as the trumpets of the captains in the famous siege of Mansoul aroused all the dormant forces of the garrison, as depicted by our greatest fabulist, rang out its shrill summons. Whatever had taken place during that interview, there was a chastened gentleness in the eye and manner of the Countess of Tilbury, and a sweet, quiet joy in the face of Mrs. Barton, as they came arm-in-arm into the dining-room, which augured well for the soothing and subliming character of their talk.

Lady Blanche, entering the room after them, was strangely moved when the countess took her in her arms and, kissing her on the cheek, whispered,

"I know all, my dear. Edward guessed it yesterday. We have been forming a little family league to insure you all you desire. What else could we do for such a resolute and arbitrary little minx? But oh, how sorry I am that I let you off the other morning!"

Blanche glanced, puzzled, at the countess, but she saw in a moment that there was nothing in that kind and gentle face but happy resignation. She felt sure that the countess did not know "all"—that the earl's secret had not escaped, to her at least. Then, as she turned her gaze on Mrs. Barton's face, catching her fine eyes fixed on her with loving admiration and content, she saw that some explanation of a favorable character had taken place.

"What do you mean, Aunt Dora?" she said.

"Your father has been over with us this morning. He and Til-

bury have had a long talk. Edward behaved nobly, Blanche. You can never be grateful enough to him. He was the—angel's advocate, I will say, in preference to the other, you know."

"Dear old Dolly!" said Lady Blanche, with streaming eyes. "He could never do otherwise than behave nobly. The sorrow of disappointing him sadly mars my happiness."

As she was speaking the door opened, and George Barton came in with Lord Charles. Barton's eyes turned first toward her as to the loadstar of his fate. Except that momentary glimpse in the darkness, this was the first time he had seen her since that precious hour in the Temple. She, conscious that the sentiment to which she had just given utterance might seem—unless sounded to its profoundest depths and properly analyzed—to be somewhat disloyal to love's jealous autocracy, blushed as she caught her lover's eyes fixed upon her with tender but melancholy eagerness. The conversation he had held with the Earl of Tilbury would have brightened any man in a less mournful position than Barton's. The young earl, without alluding to the intelligence he had received from Lord Selby, had gradually led George up to an avowal of his love, speaking to him with engaging frankness, admitting that he had thought of his cousin affectionately, and had desired her for his wife, but not discovering too much of his feelings, not exposing the depth of his passion. He did not wish to magnify to his friend or to Blanche the service he was rendering. He promised cordially, even affectionately, to stand Barton's friend with all concerned, and to promote the end to which his cousin's affections leaned; while he candidly, though delicately, let Barton know that it was for her happiness the sacrifice was made. To perform all this with perfect sincerity, and yet without wounding the *amour propre* of his friend, was certainly a nice and difficult task for the young earl, but one of which he acquitted himself with perfect success. It was a triumph of the purest devotion. For his part, Barton, in a trying position, had displayed a manliness and refinement of feeling, and a quick, generous sympathy which excited the young earl's admiration, and would have convinced him, were further proof needed by him, that the man whom Blanche had selected was fully worthy of the peerless treasure of her love.

But Tilbury's quick eyes did not fail to perceive that in Barton's cup of joy there were some drops of vinegar. There was a melancholy in his tone, a certain sadness in the deep darkness of his fine eyes, which the observer could not understand. Nay, once Barton had inadvertently let slip a phrase which had both astonished and wounded the young lord. The latter referred hopefully to the day which was to crown the triumph of his friend, when Barton's face suddenly became clouded, while the words escaped him—only not commonplace, because of their subjective significance—

"Ah, we never know what may happen to quench our brightest hopes!"

Tilbury, chilled, surprised, looked earnestly at his friend.

"Oh," he said, gravely, "such good fortune as yours ought to have none but bright presentiments!"

"But only think, my dear Tilbury, how rude a shock to our confidence in the smooth run of fortune and happiness you and I

have had within the week whose last hours are fast running away! I must own that the nerves of my spiritual being have been roughly shaken, and I do not think my faith and hope will ever recover their old tone."

Tilbury never knew the degree nor the grounds of the anguish with which these words were uttered, though they often returned to his memory in after years, when Barton was one of the strongest and happiest of men.

And as Barton had swung across the Park at an easy pace, catching a glimpse of the brilliant frivolity of the Row, glancing at the bright faces of the children who walked or gamboled on the turf, and whose fresh young voices told of life untroubled by care, unshadowed by presentiment of evil, his heart grew heavy with the sense of a coming crisis of pain and sorrow in his own life which, he thought, would never find a solace. Every impediment removed to his love for Blanche only intensified the pain of the sacrifice which he was called on to make.

Thus, when he entered the room and looked at Lady Blanche, a sharp pain of anguish pierced his heart. The blush, and a slight confusion in her manner, the restraint which the presence and keen observance of her aunt and her promise of last night to her father imposed upon her, tended to increase her agitation. As he took her hand she felt his burning and trembling in her grasp, and there was a weary melancholy in his eyes of which she vainly strove to guess the cause. The sharp glances of the two elder women were quick to discern these signs of separate and mutual perturbation; but before the scene could develop any awkwardness, the face of the earl appeared at the door, his eyes alight, his face flushed, his manner excited.

"A thousand pardons, ladies," he said. "Will you kindly go on with lunch? Charlie will do the honors. Barton, I must speak with you immediately." He beckoned to him to follow."

Lord Charles looked at his sister and laughed, as he placed the countess in a chair.

"I don't know what is the matter with him," he said. "There is a storm or an earthquake coming. The atmosphere is quite electrical. I thought he was gone to the City, but here he is. What think you, mine aunt, of his driving Blanche there last night to Scotland Yard in a hansom, and their not turning up until midnight —dumb, glum, mysterious as ghosts? Mrs. Barton, I can vouch for the excellence of this curry; our *chef* was in India with the Governor of Bengal."

Meanwhile the Earl of Selby had taken Barton by the arm and drawn him into the library.

"Barton," he exclaimed, "I have just seen one of my new solicitors—Mr. Masterman. The Pollards have bolted!"

"What!" exclaimed Barton, an angry flush mounting to his temples. "Surely Sontag has not let them escape?"

"Knox, Masterman & Bullen sent to-day to their office to get my papers. There everything was in confusion. It seems to me the two rascals went home to Charles Pollard's, drove away without being seen by the detectives to a pretended appointment, and that is all

they know at their office. Neither of them has been seen or heard of since. Their wives and families are distracted."

"My lord," said Barton, hurriedly, "I must go at once to Scotland Yard. They must not escape—they shall not escape!" He clinched his hands and teeth. "My father's honor can only be cleared by their punishment!"

The earl saw how powerful a struggle was going on in the young man's breast as he uttered these words.

"Stay!" said the peer; "I will go with you. They can not possibly escape. I saw both Sontag and the chief commissioner late last night. We passed you, Blanche and I, on our way home. They assured me both the Pollards were being closely watched, and if they have given the police the slip for the moment, depend upon it they will be stopped before many hours are over. A warning has been sent to every part of the kingdom."

George Barton listened, but was only gathering strength to perform his resolve. His face had grown pale, his eyes were glowing with fire he could not suppress; for within him, even then, duty was doggedly resisting the soft, persuasive voice of love.

"Still, my lord," he said, firmly, "I feel that I must act. At present there is no charge whatever against these men. The revelation of their infamy can no longer be delayed—unless—unless—we are to connive at a failure of justice. And oh, my lord, forgive me—I don't know how to say it!—after all the kindness and confidence you have shown me, with my heart urging me to turn aside, to hold my hand, and let these villains go, I dare not, I can not shrink from the task of vindicating my father's innocence, of bringing his murderers to justice. You can appreciate my position—I am sure you will—it is a dreadful one; and there is something as yet unknown to you, which you may never learn, that makes it more dreadful than you can even imagine to ask your leave, as I now do—and my heart is torn and bleeding with anguish while I ask it—to reveal all I know to the police."

The earl had watched him while his face betrayed the anguish of his feelings, and the beads gathered on his noble brow. He seemed to force the words out through his pale lips with a terrible effort. Enlightened by the hint which Lady Blanche had thrown out the night before as to the fearful dilemma which was distracting George's mind, he guessed all that was going on within that young, strong bosom. The old cynic's heart was touched and melted. He could have stopped him at the third sentence, but he had waited until he was quite sure of the line that George Barton had decided to take; for, knowing what a fearful temptation there was to postpone, or altogether to evade, the action which filial affection and duty alike peremptorily demanded, he wished to see whether there would be the slightest shrinking or equivocation in meeting the call. And it was no mere curiosity which prompted the earl's momentary reserve. He was beginning to feel a strong movement of affection toward the youth who, in circumstances so rare and trying, had exhibited such remarkable resources of intellect, such sterling qualities of heart and conscience. It was the attraction which one strong soul feels toward another.

"I can blow away this trouble at a breath," said the earl to him-

self, "if it be genuine; and it will be better that he should have stood the test manfully, and borne it triumphantly, than that he should not have faced it at all."

But now he saw it had gone far enough. The trial was complete. He wanted no further proof that this youth would sacrifice life, ambition, and love to duty, not because he lightly regarded any of these—a reason which accounts for much of the old Spartan or chivalric heroism—but even while he clung to all three with a vivid eagerness which intensified the agony of his self-abandonment.

So the earl interrupted him, laying his hand kindly on his shoulder.

"Pshaw! my dear boy," he said, "it is done—it is done! Don't trouble yourself any more about that. I told the police everything last night, far more frankly and minutely than you would ever have told it."

Barton gazed at the peer for a moment with a puzzled face; then a sudden sunshine flashed into it, with dew-drops in the eyes.

"Oh, thank you—thank you, my lord!" he cried, seizing the peer's hands and pressing them with feverish energy.

"Nay, nay, George," said the earl, "don't give me any credit for it. You must thank Blanche. It was she who thought of it, who urged me to it—who, indeed, would not allow me to sleep until it was done."

"Ah, you do your own heart an injustice."

"Not at all; I say you must give her all the credit; and, if I mistake not, from something she told me, sir, about which I have no time to say anything just now, you would rather be beholden to her for a good thing done than any one else in the world. Is it not so?"

A sly smile had come over the earl's face as he said these words, while Barton gazed at him confounded.

"You—you—know?" he gasped out.

The earl nodded.

"I have to inquire into this," he said, with an assumption of gravity. "Both Blanche and Lord Charles appear to have been guilty of very unfilial conduct; and as for you, George, I could not have believed it possible, while you were sitting here and acting the confidant and the mentor to a man more than twice your age, that all the while you were hiding a secret from me second only in importance, and, I should add, in its disastrous consequences, to the one I was confiding to you! Oh, George Barton, George Barton, you are the most dangerous diplomatist I ever had to cross wits with! I have been terribly punished for all the deceits I have practiced and all the lies I have told for an ungrateful country, in finding myself outwitted at last by an unfledged barrister!"

The young man could hardly trust his ears. Was this really the proud Earl of Selby who appeared to be speaking in a mock-serious tone of that which George Barton, who was a brave youth, too, would have shrunk from avowing to him as much as he would have recoiled from propounding Republicanism to a member of the royal family, or telling the Pope of Rome that Cardinal Manning had relapsed to Puritanism? His eager gaze sought and searched the

depths of the earl's gray eyes to try and read the meaning of this astounding frame of mind.

"My lord—" he began, and stopped, puzzled, troubled, trembling.

The earl smiled.

"You see," he said, "I have a private detective department. Nay, the truth is, Blanche has betrayed you, and confessed all. But this must wait—this must wait."

"Mr. Sontag, my lord!" cried Colston, throwing open the door, and the Chief of the Detective Department walked in. He appeared excited and not displeased with himself.

"Forgive me, my lord, for intruding upon you, but I have most startling news, and I have taken the liberty of coming on with it myself."

"Welcome, Mr. Sontag, whatever your news! I hope you have caught the villains," cried the earl, in a tone so sincere that neither of his auditors doubted it, albeit Sontag marveled deeply to himself.

"From our point of view, my lord, it is better news than that, though personally I am terribly disappointed by what has happened. Both the Pollards are dead."

"Dead!" shouted the earl and young Barton together.

A long sigh of relief escaped from the peer's breast. Barton felt as if by a single stroke of an omnipotent pen his dilemma had been struck out of the records of his life.

"Dead!" repeated Mr. Sontag. "Execution has overtaken them before judgment. One died slain by the other's hand, the other in resisting arrest. I say I am sorry, my lord (except for your sake—because it relieves you from any anxiety in regard to the matter you mentioned last night), for it was a wonderfully interesting case—one of the most interesting and beautiful cases in all my experience. However, there is some compensation: we have secured, I believe, the principal agent in the crime, if not the actual murderer and his assistants. A romance—a perfect romance! He had run off in the very yacht which those two scoundrels had provided for their own escape by purloining trust funds which lay in their hands. Between three and four this morning she came into collision in the Channel with a large steamer, and this man Yates, with the captain and crew, are all in our hands at Dover, along with the disabled yacht and the body of our missing detective, McLaren. The crew are all known vagabonds. I expect we shall swing up at least half of them, and we shall vindicate the honor of my department, and avenge the death of a very useful fellow. But permit me, earl, heartily to congratulate you upon the turn events have taken. You must feel greatly relieved that you will only have to face an inquest instead of a trial, and that the mouths of these villains are closed forever. Will you permit me to say that this is the only consolation I have for the unsatisfactory nature of the *denouement?*"

The peer held out his hand to the detective.

"It is a very terrible one, Mr. Sontag," he said, "but it would be idle for me to affect not to feel thankful that this awful business should have ended as it has. And I fancy that my young friend here will not be disposed to quarrel with you as the bearer of such news. Care must be taken at the inquest to bring out clearly the

honorable part played by my poor murdered friend in all this business; and when his good name is cleared neither Mr. Barton, I am sure, nor I will feel any gratification at the fearful punishment which these wretched men have drawn down on their own heads."

After a brief conversation, in which they discussed together the course to be pursued at the inquest, the earl insisting that the reward he had promised should be placed at the disposal of the chief commissioner, to be allotted, as he might think fit, among the detectives who had been employed in the investigation, with a special reservation of £500 to the wife and family of McLaren, Mr. Sontag took leave.

The earl accompanied him to the door. As he was leaving the room he said to Barton,

"I expect you are no more inclined than I am to indulge in a lunch after such intelligence as has just reached us. Wait here a few minutes and I will join you."

Barton, left to himself, walked up and down the room, his hands clasped and pressed tightly on his heart, which seemed to be expanding within him almost to bursting with relief, gratitude, and a sense of reviving strength and joy. Swiftly his thoughts ran over all the incidents and experiences, the quick variety of transformations from hope to despair, from dread and grief to sweet delight, through that short—long week of passion, which had found him a youth and left him a man; and while he was thinking of the glorious comfort which had been born of his sorrow—as many a glad and noble life has sprung from the womb of anguish and death—the door opened, and Lady Blanche entered the room. She seemed a little pale and agitated.

"Oh, George," she said, as he started forward and took her hand, "what has happened? The earl called me out of the dining-room, and said some very grave intelligence had arrived, and he added, 'Go to the library—Barton is there; I suppose you would prefer hearing good news from his lips to any other,' and he pinched my ear. What does it mean?" She was about to sink into a chair, but George Barton took her in his arms, pressed her to his heart, kissed her, and cried out,

"Oh, Blanche, Blanche, don't you know what it means? It means that all our troubles are over, and that you are mine—that you are mine!"

THE END.

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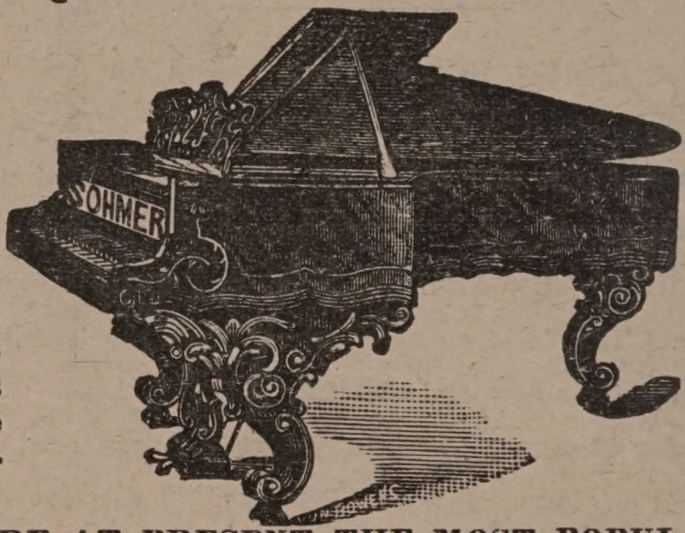

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